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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the meaning of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says that children are entitled to participate in the decisions that affect them. The paper takes a close look at the full meaning of Article 12 as a tool that can help children themselves to challenge abuses of their rights and take action to defend those rights. It also stresses what Article 12 does not do; it does not, for example, give children the right to ride roughshod over the rights of others, particularly parents. The paper makes a strong case for listening to children, outlining the implications of failing to do so and challenging many of the arguments that have been leveled against child participation. It is intended as a practical guide to this issue, with clear checklists for child participation in conferences and many concrete examples of recent initiatives. Includes 39 notes. (BT)

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PROMOTING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING

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Gerison Lansdown

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United Nations Children's Fund
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To Rosa, a very exceptional and much loved young person.

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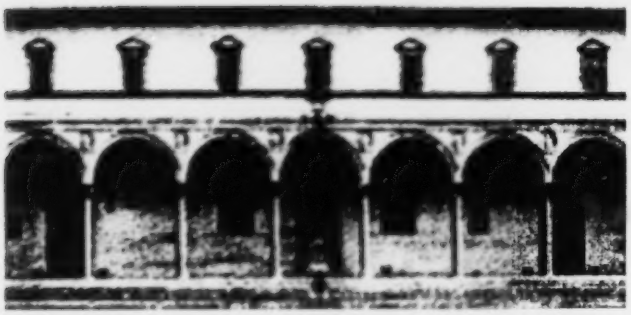

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INTRODUCTION

Since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 'child participation' has been the subject of an increasing flood of initiatives, ranging from research and publications to conferences and concrete projects. Over the past ten years, work has been developed from local to international level, in a wide range of contexts, involving children of all ages, in countries throughout the world and from every conceivable social and economic situation. National and local governments, UN Agencies, international and national NGOs, community groups and schools have started to explore what we mean by consultation, participation, partnership and empowerment.

This is still, of course, very much an experimental phase. Different practices have been introduced, different definitions of participation are being explored, different levels of power shared. There are impassioned arguments about the appropriate degree of priority to be afforded to participation from both a practical and a human rights standpoint, and whether it is an end in itself, a means to the end of promoting and protecting human rights, or both. 'Experimental' means that, inevitably, sometimes the wrong course will be followed and that mistakes will be made. 'Experimental' also implies, however, a conscious and constant effort to analyse processes and outcomes, and to learn from any errors.

Listening to children and considering seriously what they have to say can hardly be said to have been a frequent hallmark of inter-personal relationships or societal organization. The participatory thrust of the CRC demands considerable - sometimes profound - change in cultural attitudes towards children. Even adults who are utterly sympathetic to the principle of enabling children to express their views may often feel uncomfortable with the ways, means and implications of putting this into practice. Indeed, children themselves frequently experience similar feelings of unease.

This publication has been produced in the context of this rapidly changing and turbulent environment. It makes the case for a commitment to respecting children's rights to be heard and the need to consolidate and learn from existing practice. It draws on much of the already published research and thinking in the field and on a wide range of international initiatives. In so doing, it seeks to provide some practical guidance on the lessons learned to date in working with children as partners. It is anything but a definitive bible – rather a contribution to the development of tools for those who see children's rights to be heard as a means of promoting and protecting their other rights.

Gerison Lansdown
Child Rights Consultant

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATION

1.1 THE CONTEXT

There has for many years been widespread acceptance, in principle, that children are entitled to fulfilment of their social and economic rights – to education, to health care, to an adequate standard of living for proper development, to play. And similarly, the principle that childhood is a period of entitlement to special protection – from abuse, neglect and exploitation – is not new. While these rights are flagrantly violated for millions of children, in most societies in the world there is a broad consensus around the importance of working towards their greater recognition. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which formally and explicitly acknowledges these rights for children for the first time in international law, also introduces an additional dimension to the status of children by recognising that children are subjects of rights, rather than merely recipients of adult protection, and that those rights demand that children themselves are entitled to be heard.

Recognition of children as subjects of rights is expressed, explicitly or implicitly, in a number of articles in the Convention:

- Article 5 – parental provision of direction and guidance in accordance with respect for children's evolving capacity;
- Article 9 – non-separation of children from families without the right to make their views known;
- Article 12 – the right to be listened to and taken seriously;
- Article 13 – the right to freedom of expression;
- Article 14 – the right to freedom of conscience, thought and religion;
- Article 15 – the right to freedom of association;
- Article 16 – the right to privacy;
- Article 17 – the right to information;
- Article 29 – the right to education that promotes respect for human rights and democracy.

At the core is Article 12, which insists on the 'visibility' of children in their own right. Its implementation, alongside the other civil rights, involves a profound and radical reconsideration of the status of children in most societies and the nature of adult/child relationships. It requires us to begin to listen to what children say and to take them seriously. It requires that we recognise the value of their own experience, views and concerns. It also requires us to question the nature of adult responsibilities towards children. Recognising that children have rights does not mean that adults no longer have responsibilities towards children. On the contrary, children cannot and should not be left alone to fight the battles necessary to achieve respect for their rights. What is implied by the Convention, and its philosophy of respect for the dignity of children, is that adults need to learn to work more closely in collaboration with children to help them articulate their lives, to develop strategies for change and exercise their rights.

1.2 WHAT DOES ARTICLE 12 ACTUALLY SAY?

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the

child, either directly, or through a representative or appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

It is important to understand clearly what Article 12 does and does not say. It does not give children the right to autonomy. It does not give children the right to control over all decisions irrespective of their implications either for themselves or others. It does not give children the right to ride roughshod over the rights of their parents. However, it does introduce a radical and profound challenge to traditional attitudes, which assume that children should be seen and not heard.

1.2.1 All children are capable of expressing a view

There is no lower age limit imposed on the exercise of the right to participate. It extends therefore to any child who has a view on a matter of concern to them. Very small children and some children with disabilities may experience difficulties in articulating their views through speech but can be encouraged to do so through art, poetry, play, writing, computers or signing.

1.2.2 The right to express their views freely

If children are to be able to express their views, it is necessary for adults to create the opportunities for children to do so. In other words, Article 12 imposes an obligation on adults in their capacity as parents, professionals and politicians to ensure that children are enabled and encouraged to contribute their views on all relevant matters. This does not, of course, imply that children should be required to give their views if they are not willing or interested in doing so.

1.2.3 The right to be heard in all matters affecting them

The right to be heard extends to all actions and decisions that affect children's lives – in the family, in school, in local communities, at national political level. It applies both to issues that affect individual children, such as decisions about where they live following their parents' divorce, and to children as a constituency, such as legislation determining the minimum age for full time work. It is important to recognise that many areas of public policy and legislation impact on children's lives – issues relating to transport, housing, macro-economics, environment, as well as education, childcare and public health all have implications for children.

1.2.4 The right to have their views taken seriously

It is not sufficient to give children the right to be listened to. It is also important to take what they have to say seriously. Article 12 insists that children's views are given weight and should inform decisions made about them. Obviously, this does not mean that whatever children say must be complied with – simply that their views receive proper consideration.

1.2.5 In accordance with their age and maturity

The weight that must be given to children's views needs to reflect their level of understanding of the issues involved. This does not mean that young children's views will automatically be given less weight. There are many issues that very small children are capable of understanding and to which they can contribute thoughtful opinions. Competence does not develop uniformly according to rigid

The Implications of Article 12

Article 12 is a **substantive** right, saying that children are entitled to be actors in their own lives and to participate in the decisions that affect them. But, as with adults, democratic participation is not an end in itself. It is the means through which to achieve justice, influence outcomes and expose abuses of power. In other words, it is also a **procedural** right enabling children to challenge abuses or neglect of their rights and take action to promote and protect those rights. It enables children to contribute to respect for their best interests.

developmental stages. The social context, the nature of the decision, the particular life experience of the child and the level of adult support will all affect the capacity of a child to understand the issues affecting them.

1.3 THE FAILURE OF ADULTS TO LISTEN TO CHILDREN

There is a powerful body of evidence showing how prevailing attitudes towards children, based on the view that adults both know best and will act in their best interests, have failed many children. Many of these failures have resulted from a refusal to listen to the voices of children themselves. How, then have children been failed?

1.3.1 Adults can abuse their power over children

Adults in positions of power over children can exploit and abuse that power to the detriment of children's well-being. The examples are not hard to find. It is now well-documented that children in countries throughout the world are both physically and sexually abused within their own families.[1] Furthermore, during the 1980s and 1990s there was widespread exposure of the extent to which children cared for in institutions were subjected to systematic abuse by the very adults charged with responsibility for their care. The most notorious and well-publicised examples were in some of the Eastern European countries, but children have been equally vulnerable in wealthier countries such as the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

1.3.2 Adults do not always act in children's best interests

Actions detrimental to the well-being of children do not merely occur when adults deliberately abuse or neglect children. During the course of the 20th century, adults with responsibility for children across the professional spectrum have been responsible for decisions, policies and actions that have been inappropriate, if not actively harmful to children, while claiming to be acting to promote their welfare. And these actions are characterized by a consistent failure to consult or involve children themselves. One does not have to look far for the evidence – the evacuation of children during the second world war, the placement of children in large, unloving institutions that deny them emotional and psychological well-being, the practice in some countries of automatic custody of children being granted to either fathers or mothers following a divorce irrespective of circumstances, the failure to provide education for children with disabilities, attempts to remove children from the streets by institutionalizing them, and so on. There is now growing recognition that children have been more harmed than helped by these practices, yet they have all been, and in many instances continue to be justified by

Denying children a voice encourages impunity for abusers

In the UK, a series of public inquiries in the 1980s and 90s documented widespread systematic physical and sexual abuse by staff in children's homes over many years, which had been surrounded by a culture of collusion, neglect, indifference and silence on the part of staff. One of the most forceful lessons to emerge was that the abuse had been able to continue because children were denied any right to challenge what was happening to them.[2] Their stories were not believed and they were denied access to any channels to help them articulate their concerns. Indeed, if and when they did complain, they risked further abuse. In other words, the adults involved could, with impunity, behave in ways entirely contrary to the children's welfare because children were not listened to.

1 See, for example, commissions into violence, US, UK, Australia

2 *The Pindown Experience and the Protection of Children: The Report of the Staffordshire Child Care Enquiry*, Levy A. and Kahan B. Staffordshire County Council, 1991 and *The Leicestershire Inquiry 1992*, Kirkwood A. (Leicestershire County Council 1993); *Lost In Care*, the Tribunal of Inquiry into abuse of children in care in Clywd and Gwynedd, Sir Ronald Waterhouse, DH/Welsh Office 2000

adults while the children themselves have gone unheard.

1.3.3 Parents rights are protected over those of children

Public policy often supports the rights and interests of parents ahead of those of children, even when the consequences of so doing are detrimental to the welfare of children. And of course, parents, as adults and voters, have a more powerful influence on and access to governments than children. For example, physical punishment of children persists in many countries throughout the world although the Committee on the Rights of the Child has clearly stated that it represents a violation of Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the right to protection from all forms of violence. Parents defend its use on grounds of needing to impose effective discipline on their children. Yet, there is considerable evidence that physical punishment of children is not an effective form of discipline, that it can and does cause harm, and that as a form of punishment it can and does escalate.[3] It is rare for children's views on the use of physical punishment to be solicited.

1.3.4 Children's interests are often disregarded in public policy

Children's interests are frequently disregarded in the public policy sphere in favour of more powerful interest groups. It is not necessarily the case that children's welfare is deliberately disregarded, but rather that children's voices, and the impact of public policy on their lives, are not visible in decision-making forums and accordingly, never reach the top of the political agenda.

In very few countries in the world – South Africa, Norway and Sweden being among the few exceptions – is there any real analysis of public expenditure to assess whether the proportion spent on children and their well-being reflects either their levels of need or their representation within the community.

And in many cities throughout the world, there is increasing intolerance of children in the public arena. Far from creating towns and cities that are designed with children in mind, children are widely viewed as undesirable in streets and shops, particularly when they are in groups. Public spaces are seen as 'owned' by adults, with young people's presence in those spaces representing an unwanted intrusion.

1.4 THE CASE FOR LISTENING TO CHILDREN

1.4.1 It leads to better decisions

Children have a body of experience and knowledge that is unique to their situation. They have views and ideas as a result of that experience. Yet in too many countries, there is a failure or even a refusal to recognise the legitimacy of their contribution to decision-making. Much of government policy impacts directly or indirectly on children's lives, yet it is developed and delivered largely in ignorance of how it will affect the day-to-day lives of children and their present and future well-being.

Most countries in the world are concerned

Children have different views from adults on the nature of physical punishment

In 1998, a consultation exercise conducted with 70 children aged 5-7 in England provided graphic evidence of the humiliation, pain and rejection they experience when their parents hit them. When asked what they understood by a 'smack', they all described it as a hit. Their comments on how it felt included such phrases as *"it feels like someone banged you with a hammer"*, *"it's like breaking your bones"*, *"it's like you're bleeding"* and, *"it hurts, it's hard and it makes you sore"*. Their accounts are in stark contrast to the widely promulgated view from many parents that such punishment is delivered with love, does not cause real hurt and is only applied *in extremis*.[4]

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3 *Hitting People is Wrong – and Children Are People Too*, Epoch Worldwide/Radda Barnen, London, Strauss M.A.: *Beating the Devil out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families*, 1994, Lexington Books, New York; *Summary Report of the AMA Commission on Violence and Youth*, 1993, American Psychological Association, Washington DC

4 *It Hurts You Inside*, Willow and Hyder, National Children's Bureau/Save the Children, 1998

Evidence of the disregard of children's interests

Little regard was given to children in the imposition of structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s, despite the devastating impact of the reduced investment in social welfare, and the privatization of education and health care services that accompanied them. In many countries in the European Union – for example Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK – children suffered disproportionately from poverty in the 1980s and 1990s in the face of economic policies that failed to prioritize their needs.[5]

to improve educational opportunities and standards for children. Yet very few take any measures to find out from children themselves what teaching methods work, whether the curriculum is relevant, what factors contribute to school drop-out rates and truancy, how to improve attendance rates, what is needed to promote better inclusion of girls, how to enhance good behaviour and promote effective discipline. Evidence indicates that schools involving children and introducing more democratic structures are likely to be more harmonious, have better staff/pupil relationships and a more effective learning environment.[7] Children who feel valued, feel that there are systems for dealing with injustices, and who are consulted over the development of school policies are far more likely to respect the school environment. If the devastating drop-out rate of pupils in so many countries in the world is to be stemmed, schools must become places where children want to be, where they find respect for their concerns. If they are to experience some ownership of the school, and develop a sense of commitment and responsibility towards it, then they need opportunities to be involved in the decisions, policies and structures of the school that affect them on a daily basis.

Children have different perceptions from adults

An interesting example of the contrast between adult assumptions and the reality of children's lives was highlighted in a project undertaken with 4-5 year olds in a poor district of London in the UK in 1993.[6] The children were asked to produce a mural depicting their local environment as it currently was and then as they would like to see it. The researchers found that children objected to the local council providing play areas covered in grass – widely thought to be the most appropriate surfacing. Rather they wanted concrete areas because grass made it impossible for them to see the broken glass, dog excrement and discarded needles used by the drug addicts.

In many societies, children are increasingly perceived as at risk from dangers in their local environment – fear of their exposure to traffic, drugs, violence and sexual abuse has led to the imposition of far greater controls over the freedom and mobility of children. However, their own experience is rarely acknowledged or utilised to develop strategies for addressing these problems. In consequence children's opportunities for play, friendships, growing independence and exploration are denied in the name of their protection.

National and international campaigns to end child labour have often failed to address the reality of working children's lives. By failing to consult with children themselves as well as their families, the impact of such campaigns has sometimes been to worsen children's situation.

If we want to make the best decisions, then we need the best information available. Consulting children and drawing on their perceptions, knowledge and ideas are essential to the development of effective public policy. Furthermore, children are often less cynical, more

5 *Children, Economics and the EU – Towards Child Friendly Policies*, Radda Barnen, on behalf of the ICSA, Stockholm, 2000

6 Stepney and Wapping Community Child Health Project, Stepney Community Nursing Development Unit, research and development programme1993-5

7 See for example, The Euridem Project, Davies and Kirkpatrick, Children's Rights Alliance for England, London, 2000

Failing to listen can lead to the wrong decisions

In Bangladesh, children who were laid off from garment industry jobs after an American campaign to end the employment of children under 15 in this industry led to those children entering forms of employment that were less appropriate and more hazardous than the jobs from which they were sacked.[8] Similarly, many programmes that have sought to remove children from the streets by providing them with institutionalized accommodation and education failed because they did not seek the views of the children themselves. Those programmes that have been effective are those seeking to empower children by working with them, enabling their own experience to inform the development of appropriate interventions and services. For example, Bangladesh is now creating appropriate education for children in all types of work through participatory workshops with groups of children from every occupational category.

optimistic and more flexible in their approach to the future and the capacity for change.

1.4.2 It strengthens a commitment to, and understanding of, democracy

In both well-established and newly-formed democracies, there is a need for children to experience the implications of democratic decision-making. In those countries facing internal conflict and tensions that threaten democracy, such experience takes on an even greater significance. Children need opportunities to learn what their rights and duties are, how their freedom is limited by the rights and freedoms of others and how their actions can affect the rights of others. They need opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making processes within school and within local communities, and learn to abide by subsequent decisions. Only by experiencing respect for their own views and discovering the importance of their respect for the views of others, will they acquire the capacity and willingness to listen to others and so begin to understand the processes and value of democracy. It is through learning to question, to express views and having their opinions taken seriously, that children will acquire the skills and competence to develop their thinking and to exercise judgement in the myriad of issues that will confront them as they approach adulthood. Unfortunately, when democracy is taught in schools, it is often undertaken through simulation activities – for example, copying formal elections, running UN exercises – with no reference to the day-to-day arbitrary exercise of power in the school. What is needed is the development of participatory processes in all institutional settings with children to promote their understanding that these settings are what democracy is actually about – that democracy means more than the election of a national government.

There is considerable evidence that young people are increasingly disaffected from the formal political process in many European countries as well as North America, where patterns of both voter registration and actual voting among young people are low.[9] Promoting involvement of young people is a means whereby they can acquire knowledge and understanding of political processes as well as strengthening their interest in and commitment to democracy. And there is evidence that children do want a greater say in their lives. Cynicism and lack of active engagement in existing political structures is not necessarily an indication of lack of interest in political issues.

Many children in many countries in the world feel that their views do not matter, that they cannot influence outcomes and that democracy does not work for them. At a formal level, most children are precluded from the right to vote in elections until they are 18 years old and are thus unable to exercise any role in formal representative democratic institutions. Bosnia Herzegovina, Brazil, Croatia, Cuba, Iran, Nicaragua, Philippines, Serbia, Montenegro and Slovenia are the only countries that have reduced the voting age below 18 years.

However, democracy can be understood in much broader terms as participation in civil

8 In *Children's Words*, UNICEF Bangladesh, 1997

9 See for example, 'General Election: First Time Voters', MORI, 1997 and *Freedom's Children*, Wilkinson and Mulgan, Demos, London, 1995

society. Many groups who have traditionally suffered disadvantage – for example, women and people with disabilities – have increasingly entered into dialogue with politicians at local and national levels to promote and press for greater recognition of their concerns. The instruments of parliamentary democracy have not proved sufficient to reflect their interests. Without access even to the formal democratic processes, children have an even stronger claim for comparable political participation. Exclusion from participation imposes a two-fold discrimination on children. It represents a denial of the fundamental right to be listened to and taken seriously in decisions that affect them in legislation, policy, resource allocation, as required by Article 12 of the CRC. As a result of this exclusion, they are denied the right to influence the exercise of other rights.

1.4.3 It protects children better

We only truly learn that we have rights and come to believe in them through the process of acting on them. Having a voice about one's rights is therefore essential to their fulfilment. It is sometimes argued that giving children rights places them outside adult protection – that if their views are taken seriously, they will make decisions and act in ways that place them at risk. This is to misunderstand the nature of the rights embodied in the CRC. As argued earlier, the Convention does not give children full adult rights. Rather, it gives children the right to be heard and to gradually take increasing responsibility for decisions as their competence evolves. And where children are encouraged to articulate their concerns and given opportunities to express their views, they will be far better protected. The silence that has accompanied sexual abuse of children within families, for example, has served to protect only the abuser. Where it is recognised that children are entitled to challenge their situation and given the mechanisms to do so, abuse and violations of rights are far more easily exposed. Children who are encouraged to talk are empowered to challenge abuses of their rights and are not simply reliant on adults to protect them. Furthermore, adults can only act to protect children if they know what is happening in children's lives – only children can provide that information. Violence against children in prisons, abuse in foster homes, racism in schools, misrepresentation of children in the media can only be tackled effectively if children can tell their stories to those with the authority to take appropriate action.

1.4.4 It is a fundamental human right

All people have a right to express their views when decisions are being made that directly affect their lives – and children are people too. Whether it is an individual decision about where a child will live following her parents' divorce, or broader issues such as the rules imposed at school, legislation on the minimum age for full time work, or representation of children in the media, children have a right to articulate their concerns, participate in the development of policy and be taken seriously.

Children are interested in being involved

A survey carried out in Austria in 1997 of 800 13-17 year olds, asked them whether they wanted political information and participation. 93 per cent wanted to be informed when new projects were planned in their municipality and 65 per cent wanted youth consulting hours with politicians.[10] The findings reveal a significant desire for greater involvement.

The widespread view of many young people is encapsulated by the observation of one contributor to a consultation with young people undertaken by Euronet, a European children's rights organization, to explore their views on discrimination against children: *"There are a lot of people out there who want to have a say but either they don't know enough about how to go about it or they do have a say but are ignored so they won't speak out again".*[11]

10 'Jugendliche reden mit', Unpublished report, Riepl and Riegler, Graz: Kommunale Beratungsstelle fur Kinder and Jugendinitiativen, 1997

11 *Challenging Discrimination against Children*, G. Lansdown, Euronet, Brussels, 2000

Why children want to be involved in issues that affect them

- It offers them new skills
- It builds their self-esteem
- It challenges the sense of impotence often associated with childhood
- It empowers them to tackle abuses and neglect of their rights
- They have a great deal they want to say
- They think that adults often get it wrong
- They feel their contribution could lead to better decisions
- They feel it is right to listen to them when it is their life at issue
- They want to contribute to making the world a better place
- It can be fun
- It offers a chance to meet with children from different environments, of different ages and experience

1.5 ARGUMENTS OFTEN USED TO CHALLENGE PARTICIPATION BY CHILDREN

1.5.1 Children lack the competence or experience to participate

But children, like adults, have different levels of competence in different parts of their lives. Even small children can tell you what they like or dislike about school and why, can have ideas to make lessons more interesting, can offer help to other children. Provided they are given appropriate support, adequate information and allowed to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them – pictures, poems, drama, photographs, as well as conventional discussions, interviews and group work – all children can participate in issues that are important to them. Indeed, babies and toddlers can be seen as participating in varying degrees depending upon our orientation to their development. The creation of settings that maximise childrens' opportunities to explore and initiate activities themselves, is one way to fulfil the spirit of the CRC.

1.5.2 Children must learn to take responsibility before they can be granted rights

But one of the more effective ways of encouraging children to accept responsibility is to first respect their rights. If children are given the chance to share their ideas in a group and to have them taken seriously, then they will learn that others too, have a right to be heard that must also be respected.

1.5.3 Giving children rights to be heard will take away their childhood

Article 12 does not impose an obligation on children to participate. Rather, it provides a right for children to do so. And it is a romanticised view of childhood to imagine that they are not making decisions and taking responsibilities from a very early age. Even small children in very protected environments might be involved in making decisions about friendships, coping with parental divorce and negotiating between parents in conflict, deciding what games to play and negotiating rules.

1.5.4 It will lead to lack of respect for parents

Listening to children is about respecting them and helping them learn to value the importance of respecting others. It is not about teaching them to ignore their parents. Indeed, Article 29 of the Convention clearly states that one of the aims of education is to teach children respect for their parents. Listening is a way of resolving conflict, finding solutions and promoting understanding – these can only be beneficial for family life. Listening to children is a positive symbol of love and respect. It can be difficult for some parents to respect children's rights to participate when they feel that they, themselves have never been respected as subjects of rights. This does not imply the need to retreat from encouraging children to participate but, rather, the need to be sensitive in doing so. Children should not be led to believe that they alone have a right to have a voice; wherever possible, their families should be involved in the process.

2. THE PRACTICE OF PARTICIPATION

2.1 THE POTENTIAL SCOPE FOR CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

Since the Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force in 1990, there has been a great deal of discussion and practical action to give effect to the principle embodied in Article 12 that children have a right to be listened to and taken seriously. It has become clear that children can become successfully involved in:

- Research;
- Monitoring and making decisions regarding their health;
- Managing their own institutions such as schools;
- Evaluating services intended for younger people;
- Peer representation;
- Advocacy;
- Project design, management, monitoring and evaluation;
- Campaigning and lobbying;
- Analysis and policy development;
- Publicity and use of the media;
- Conference participation.

Their involvement can take place in any institutional setting with which children have contact – school, residential homes, juvenile justice systems, the media, child care agencies, youth services, workplaces, health services, local and national government. And they can participate at all levels from the family to local communities to the international arena. However, if their participation is to be meaningful, it is imperative that their engagement is directly linked to their own first-hand experience and is identified by the children themselves as a key area of concern.

And what emerges from the accumulated experience over the past ten years is a wealth of knowledge and skill that can be shared and developed to promote more effective democratic involvement of children. There are no predefined strategies, no ideal or universal models. The method used will depend on the issue, the project, or activity – whether the process is local, regional, national or international. It will also depend on the aim of the process.

2.2 PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

There are a number of fundamental principles that should underpin any activity seeking to promote children's democratic participation.

2.2.1 Children must understand what the project or the process is about, what it is for and their role within it

Bringing children in to promote an adult agenda is at best tokenistic and at worst exploitative. Events that have children carrying banners displaying slogans that they have had no part in formulating or conferences that get children to perform without understanding the full agenda do not comply with the principle of participation. Similarly, if children are not provided with appropriate information, they cannot make informed choices or express reasoned views. Information needs to be provided for children in formats that are accessible and age-appropriate.

2.2.2 Power relations and decision-making structures must be transparent

It is important that children understand from the beginning what decisions can be made and by whom. If they discover, after a project has started, that they lack the power that they thought they had, they are likely to feel resentful and cynical about the process.

2.2.3 Children should be involved from the earliest possible stage of any initiative

If they are brought in at the last minute, they have no opportunity to shape or influence either the process or the outcomes. Their presence will have little impact on the project as a whole. Evidence shows that children are likely to have strong and creative ideas about how a project needs to develop if it is to be meaningful and relevant to them. It is not always possible to involve children from the very beginning but the earlier they are involved the more likely it is that the project will allow a genuine engagement and contribution from them.

2.2.4 All children should be treated with equal respect regardless of their age, situation, ethnicity, abilities or other factors

The participation of all children should be respected as of equal value although children of different ages and abilities will require different levels of support and will contribute in different ways. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that all children for whom an initiative is relevant are enabled to participate and are not excluded as a result of their 'invisibility' within local communities – for example, an initiative focusing on improving the local environment should include children with disabilities, girls, younger children, children from ethnic minority communities and so on. There is also a need to avoid an exclusive focus on activities or projects that address the concerns of more visible groups of children. There is, for example, a great deal of work carried out with children living and working on the street, but very little to empower children in institutions.

2.2.5 Ground rules should be established with all the children at the beginning

All projects involving children need to establish ground rules that are negotiated and agreed between the adults and the children. There may be some boundaries that the adults need to impose because of their responsibilities for a project. However, any such boundaries need to be clear and explicit from the beginning. While ground rules can be renegotiated during the course of the project, this needs to be done democratically with the children involved.

2.2.6 Participation should be voluntary and children should be allowed to leave at any stage

Children cannot be required to take part in a project if it is to be genuinely participatory. For example, taking children from a school to attend a conference without their agreement or active involvement is not participation, even if they contribute once there. Furthermore, children should be enabled to leave at any stage.

2.2.7 Children are entitled to respect for their views and experience

All projects need to be grounded in recognition that children's participation is a fundamental human right. It is not a gift on the part of sympathetic adults and should never be offered or withdrawn as a reward or punishment.

2.3 PRACTICAL LESSONS FOR PROMOTING EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION

There are no blue prints to effective consultation and participation with children. Indeed, to create blue prints would be to deny children the opportunity to be involved in the design and development of projects. Every project needs to develop its own methodology appropriate to its own aims. However, there are a number of practical lessons that have been learnt as a result of many initiatives to promote children's participation around the world. These lessons apply to all

Characteristics of effective and genuine participation

THE PROJECT

- Issue is of real relevance to children themselves
- Capacity to make a difference - where possible produce long-term or institutional change
- Linked to children's direct day-to-day experience
- Adequate time and resources made available
- Realistic expectations of children
- Clear goals and targets agreed with children
- Addresses the promotion or protection of children's rights

VALUES

- Honesty from adults about the project and the process
- Inclusive – equal opportunity for participation by all groups of interested children
- Equal respect for children of all ages, abilities, ethnicity, social background
- Information is shared with the children to enable them to make real choices
- Children's views are taken seriously
- Voluntary nature of children's involvement
- Decision-making is shared

METHODOLOGY

- Clarity of purpose
- Child-friendly meeting places, language and structures
- Involvement of children from the earliest possible stages
- Training provided to help children acquire necessary skills
- Methods of involvement developed in collaboration with children
- Adult support provided where needed
- Strategies developed for sustainability

efforts to involve children – from conferences to empowerment projects, consultation exercises to democratic schooling.

2.3.1 Be prepared to listen to children's priorities

The presumption that what adults, rather than children, say and think is necessarily more sensible, relevant and appropriate is deeply rooted in the culture of most societies. If children's active involvement in decisions that affect their lives is to be respected, it is necessary to recognise the importance of challenging that presumption. Children will have their own views on what projects or activities they think are important or what rights are not being respected, and these may well differ from adult priorities. And children's interest will not be sustained in projects that do not seem relevant to their day-to-day lives. For example, you may feel that tackling drug misuse is a priority but if the children are primarily concerned about their treatment in school, a programme to open a dialogue with teachers, press for democratic structures and end physical punishment is far more likely to engage them. You also need to remember that many issues traditionally seen as adult concerns also impact on children – housing, transport, health care – and children may want to be involved in these.

There has to be a preparedness to listen to what children actually say, engage fully with it and act on it. Children and young people may express themselves differently from adults but that does not mean the content of what they are saying is any less valuable. Of course, it is not always going to be possible to give children what they want. But children will accept this if they feel that they are being treated with respect, they understand the process of decision-making and what they say has been given proper consideration.

2.3.2 Be clear about what you are trying to achieve

Clarity about your objectives is essential. You

Key lessons

- Be prepared to listen to children's priorities
- Be clear about what you are trying to achieve
- Be clear about the boundaries of the proposed activity
- Do the necessary research
- Be willing to consult with children on methods of involving them
- Remember that children are not a homogenous group
- Be prepared to make the necessary time available
- Make available the necessary resources
- Remember the importance of working with adults as well as children
- Be prepared to be challenged
- Don't underestimate children
- Develop indicators or goals for effective participation in collaboration with children
- Be prepared to make mistakes and get it wrong

need to ask the question, why are you undertaking the initiative and what do you hope to achieve? Is it to get improved information to support the development of a service or policy? Is it to empower individual children? Is it to promote a culture of respect for children? Is it to enhance children's understanding of and competence in exercising democratic decision-making? Addressing these questions will help you determine your methodology and approach. For example:

- If you are seeking the views of children to help decide priorities for expenditure on local play facilities, a one-off time-limited consultation exercise will suffice. However, if you want children to be involved in developing, designing, monitoring play opportunities in the longer term, you will need the work with them to establish structures that enable continuing involvement and allow for children's views to be built into the decision-making processes.
- If you want to find out why there is a high drop-out rate among girls in schools, you can design a short-term research project to elicit their reasons and experiences. However, if you want to develop programmes to reduce school drop-out, and improve the quality of children's educational experience, you will need to introduce mechanisms for involving children themselves in the development of schooling. This will necessitate more democratic systems of decision-making, a commitment to taking children seriously, and a willingness to act on what they suggest. It is a long-term commitment involving significant structural and organizational change as well as a shift in the balance of power within the education system.
- If you want to get children's views on their treatment by the police on the streets, you can find out through a conventional research project targeted at young people. However, if your aim is to empower young people to challenge abuses of rights, you will need to help them gain an understanding of their rights, enable them to articulate how those rights are abused and develop strategies promoting respect for their rights, and systems for self and peer advocacy.

2.3.3 Be clear about the boundaries of the proposed activity

Children who are invited to participate in an initiative or programme need to be informed from the beginning what their role will be, what decisions, if any, are within their control, and what is open to negotiation. It is necessary to address:

- **Decision-making structures.** It needs to be clear whether the initiative involves a process of consultation, participation, empowerment or self advocacy. In many situations, all decision-making is in the hands of adults. The children need to be told this at the outset if they are not to become quickly disillusioned. In schools, for example, will all proposals made by a school council involving expenditure have to be sanctioned by the governing body or headteacher? Will the children be granted a budget over which they have control? There also needs to be the opportunity

to renegotiate the structures as children gain in confidence and competence.

- **Capacity for change.** There is little point in consulting children over decisions or proposals over which they can have no influence. If a local council has no money to fund new facilities for children, then there is little point in finding out what children would like. If politicians are not willing to take children's views seriously, then it is a waste of time to raise children's expectations by inviting them to be involved unless work is also being done to tackle the attitudes of the politicians. If there is a possibility that obstacles could develop that will prevent them from completing their goals, they should be warned about this. It is not always necessary that children succeed but they must be able to understand the reasons for failure so that they do not attribute it to their own ineffectiveness
- **Time-scale.** Children need to be informed about the likely time-scale for achieving change. If they are involved in a campaign for legal reform, for example, to end physical punishment of children or establish rights to education for children with disabilities, then the likelihood is that the work will need to continue at a sustained level for a very long period. If they are working to establish a democratic council in school, then although it may take time, they will be actively involved throughout and will hopefully see change occurring at each stage of the process. On the other hand, if they have been involved in a one-off consultation on a local initiative, there may be a considerable time gap between the consultation itself and any possible outcome. In this case, it is important to forewarn the children and keep them informed throughout.
- **Competing interests.** Children's proposals for action or for change will frequently encounter competing interests. Part of the process of participation is the need to help them marshall the necessary arguments with which to present their case and challenge opposing views. However, it is also necessary to acknowledge, in a democratic environment, that other views can have legitimacy and other groups of people also have the right to be heard.

2.3.4 Do the necessary research

Once you have decided what you hope to achieve, you need to do some ground work to develop the most effective and appropriate approach. For example:

- Identify what other relevant initiatives have been developed in the same field or area. Would it be helpful to collaborate with them? Are there lessons you can learn from them?
- Consider the different communities of children who need to be involved. For example, if you want to develop long-term structures to enable children to influence local policies, you will need to develop strategies to engage as many children as possible from the local community. This may involve children from different ethnic groups, children who speak minority languages, children with disabilities, older and younger children, refugee children and children who are socially excluded. If, however, your focus is improving access to education for girls in domestic labour, the challenge will be to identify as many as possible of this one group of children who are by definition isolated and hidden from view. This process of determining who is to be included will need to be subject to revision by the children once they design the project using principles of inclusiveness.
- Establish a small steering group of children to help you ask the right questions, design your methodology, explore effective models of participation.
- Find out how others in your organization feel about the proposal and try to enlist their support.

2.3.5 Be willing to consult with children on methods of involving them

Children themselves will have views and ideas on how to construct effective methods of involvement that are likely to differ from processes or forums designed for adults. They must be recognised as having expertise in being young and knowing what works for them. You should consider that:

- Children have many means of expressing their views, and experiences – through

drama, poetry, art, role play, photography, the Internet. These alternatives to direct verbal communication are equally valid and can provide powerful illustration of children's lives, their problems and their strategies for change. It is important to consult with children themselves on how they wish to share their views.

- Children will know what forums are likely to be successful and what will not work. For example, adult-style meetings lasting hours are unlikely to appeal to any children, let alone younger ones. Consultations taking place in school may be negatively influenced by the hierarchical nature of the school environment. Conferences that involve endless speakers on a platform are likely to be too passive a format to excite and engage children. Find out from children themselves where they would like to meet, and what form they would like the meetings to take.
- Children are familiar with the language, culture and preoccupations of youth, factors essential in creating environments in which children feel comfortable, relaxed and safe. For example, meetings in formal settings may inspire confidence among children that they are being taken seriously or they may intimidate them. Children may prefer to have some children-only meetings in order to develop their confidence and develop their ideas.

2.3.6 Remember that children are not a homogenous group

Children, like adults, are not a homogenous group. Their views will undoubtedly reflect as wide a range of concerns and opinions as those raised by adults – but they will provide a different perspective. Some projects will rightly target one group of children because of a particular vulnerability to violations of their rights – for example, refugee or asylum seekers. Others will be inclusive initiatives, for example involving all children in a particular school or living in a particular community. What is important is that all the children who have a legitimate interest in a project are encouraged and enabled to participate and that weaker or more isolated children are not marginalised. There is a danger that the only children who get involved are the articulate, better off, able individuals who, while having a valid contribution to make, do not reflect the breadth of children's experience.

It is also important to recognise that many issues affecting children are common to them all and that it is not always appropriate to focus on children in terms of 'problems'. For example, while it may be valuable to undertake a specific piece of work with children with disabilities to enable them to articulate their experience of the barriers to their active participation in daily life, it is also necessary to include them in work designed to promote child-friendly schools. Separating out groups of children will inevitably result in an emphasis on difference rather than common agendas.

Children of different ages and abilities can work together effectively but you may need to offer them different levels of support and use a variety of methods of working and expression to enable all children to participate to the maximum. In addition, all projects will have a number of different roles that children can fulfil according to their aptitudes, interests and abilities, each of which should be promoted and valued equally.

2.3.7 Be prepared to make the necessary time available

Involving children does take time. There are no shortcuts to effective participation. If you want to do it properly, it is essential to ensure that you have undertaken the necessary planning and preparation. Time may be necessary for:

- Undertaking initial research with children themselves on how to develop the initiative;
- Getting an advisory or planning group of children together to work on the initiative;
- Providing children with training on how to chair meetings, take decisions, keep records, interview prospective staff, undertake research, deal with the media;
- Ensuring that children are kept fully informed about what is happening;
- Enabling children to have sufficient time to prepare for participation in meetings and conferences – they should never be placed in situations for which they have not been properly prepared;
- Evaluating progress, and taking stock of what is working and what needs to change.

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It is also necessary to acknowledge that children have busy lives. Many potential participants are likely to be in full-time education, many will have work responsibilities either in the home or in the formal or informal labour market. Children also have social lives and a right to play and leisure. Participation in projects will necessarily have to be fitted around these other demands on children's time and designed in recognition of children's limited availability. Children themselves, of course will have ideas about the best times for meeting.

2.3.8 Make available the necessary resources

Consultation will involve the commitment of some resources. You should produce a budget at the outset of the project and try to ensure that you have the money you need for its success. Some of the costs may be reduced by using the resources of your own organization. Costs will obviously vary according to the nature of the initiative, its duration, geographical spread and numbers of children involved. For example:

- Children may need help with the costs of any fares to attend meetings. This will be of particular importance if the initiative is a national or regional one and necessitates children travelling considerable distances. But even local projects may require children to use public transport incurring costs that must be covered. It is also important to remember that children will usually need the money in advance of the travel as they have little or no income of their own.
- Meeting rooms may have to be hired throughout the course of the project.
- Staff time needs to be allocated to the project.
- You may need to pay for stationary, postage, telephone. The project may need its own headed paper, website, email address. If it is involved in seeking a wide recruitment of children, there may be considerable costs involved in extensive mailings
- Experts may be needed to provide training for the children.
- You may want to consider whether to provide for payment of fees for children who, for example, contribute to a conference or take part in a research project.

2.3.9 Remember the importance of working with adults as well as children

Strategies to give children a voice will only work if there are adults willing to listen to them. There is still considerable resistance to the concept of listening to children and taking them seriously – the view that adults have nothing to learn from children retains a powerful hold. You will need to invest time in working with adults in key positions of power, for example, head teachers, the police, local politicians, to persuade them of the benefits of a more open and democratic relationship with children and young people.

2.3.10 Be prepared to be challenged

Once you involve children in an activity, they will have their own ideas on how it could or should evolve. This may differ significantly from how you originally conceived the activity. You will need to be open to their suggestions and prepared to negotiate over the possibility of changing the direction, goals, time-scale of the project. Developing structures for discussion, and the development of collaborative solutions with children are important parts of the process of participation and democracy

2.3.11 Don't underestimate children

Because children are so rarely heard in adult arenas, there is sometimes a tendency, when they do participate, to exaggerate their contribution. To do so is to patronize them. There is also sometimes a view that, when children contribute in an adult forum, it is not acceptable to challenge or disagree with them. Of course it is reasonable to disagree as long as it is done with respect and is not simply a dismissal of the children and their right to speak. Treating children with excessive caution is as bad as ignoring them. It can lead to an underestimation of children's capacities, the placing of expectations on their contribution that are too low, and to a reduction in the potential gains from their involvement. While children should be allowed to participate as children – forcing them to behave as 'mini-adults' is neither desirable nor appropriate – they are capa-

ble of making informed and analytical contributions and should be recognised as such.

2.3.12 Develop indicators or goals for effective participation in collaboration with children

It is valuable in setting up a project, research programme or conference to have a clear set of goals or targets that you hope to achieve. These need to be agreed with the participating children based on their aspirations and expectations from the programme. These targets might be quantitative – the numbers of children involved, the numbers of meetings organized, the numbers of children in the project now receiving basic education. They might also be related to public evidence of change – schools introducing democratic structures, local authorities agreeing to act on recommendations by children, improved conditions for working children, more positive representation of children in the media. Or they might relate to the quality of the children's experience – growth in self-esteem and confidence, the quality of the inter-personal relationships, the effectiveness of democratic decision-making within the project. These latter targets are obviously more difficult to measure. Setting targets and monitoring progress on a regular basis will provide a focus for reflection and discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of work being done and for developing future programmes. You could also establish a process for the participatory monitoring of the programme or project with the children.

2.3.13 Be prepared to make mistakes and get it wrong

The practice of involving children is still relatively new. Most individuals and organizations in this field are still exploring and experimenting with what works. Everyone at times will make mistakes, miss out vital steps, underestimate the time needed, fail to involve the right children. It is important to accept that this is a learning curve and that it is through mistakes that practice will improve. There is a common fear among organizations of being tokenistic. However, if you follow the basic principles and practice outlined above, it will help get the framework right. And if you get it wrong then you can learn from the mistakes and do better the next time. The children will undoubtedly let you know!

2.4 PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

Meaningful approaches to involving children can be broadly grouped into three categories, although these are far from being mutually exclusive and the boundaries are rarely clear cut. They are introduced here primarily to help conceptualize the type of work being described:

- **Consultative processes** – in which adults initiate processes to obtain information from children through which they can improve legislation, policies or services;
- **Participative initiatives** – where the aim is to strengthen processes of democracy, create opportunities for children to understand and apply democratic principles or involve children in the development of services and policies that impact on them;
- **Promoting self advocacy** – where the aim is to empower children to identify and fulfil their own goals and initiatives.

Projects or initiatives can also move through from one category to another as they evolve and as children, and indeed adults, grow in confidence.

2.4.1 Consultative processes

Consultation is a process whereby adults seek to find out about children's experiences, views and concerns in order that legislation, policies or services can be better informed. In general, processes of consultation have the following characteristics:

- They are adult-initiated;
- They are adult led and managed;
- Children have no control over the outcomes;
- Children may be provided with opportunities for organizing together, acquiring skills and confidence and contributing towards influencing outcomes.

Commonly identified problems

The children are not representative

When children are speaking on an issue, whether at a conference or to their national or local government, they are often accused of not being representative. Children can rarely be formally representative but this does not invalidate their contribution, provided they make no claim to speak for all children. Their own views may be based on experience of rights abuses within their community, on research undertaken with a wider group of young people, on work undertaken within a project they are involved in. These experiences all provide legitimacy from which to speak, certainly no less so than many of the adults who make representations to governments. However, it is important that in seeking to raise awareness of children's concerns and to empower children to get involved in actions to promote and protect their rights, the voices of children from different experiences and perspectives are heard. One of the problems here is that many adults treat children as though they were representative and this view is sometimes taken on board by the children themselves.

Some children become 'professionalised' child speakers

There is a danger that some children become almost 'professionalised' as speakers and representatives for their organization with the result that they spend their lives in public arenas and away from the roots that provide the source and legitimacy for their contribution. The particular value of creating opportunities for children to be heard is that they are speaking from direct and continuing experience. It is important not to lose that. Some organizations have developed a non-hierarchical structure to avoid this happening or encouraged children to create many roles within their organization. For example, Article 12, a UK child-led organization has a large steering committee all of whom can represent the organization, as, indeed, can any of the members. It has a rotating chair and it consistently seeks to create opportunities for younger as well as older children to participate in public events.

It is difficult to sustain initiatives as children grow up

Projects and organizations involving children, by their very nature will experience continual 'haemorrhaging' as the children grow up. It is important therefore to build in the capacity to involve new children and facilitate the transfer of skills from older to younger children. Some organizations develop the concept of young people advisers who can continue on in a supportive role once they have reached the maximum age range for the project.

Children can be manipulated by adult agendas

There is a danger that adults can use children to promote their own political agendas. It is important therefore that events and projects establish clear principles and ground-rules setting out how decisions are made and by whom, and the respective relationships between adults and children. In general, while it may be the case that children are being used by adults in some initiatives, the likelihood is that as the children gain in confidence and skills through their involvement, they will increasingly wish to determine their own agenda and challenge attempts by adults to deflect them from their defined priorities.

In other words, it is a process in which there is no structural change in the relations between adults and children. The balance of power does not alter. The issue of key importance in the process of consultation is that it involves a recognition by adults in positions of power of the validity of children's experience, that it can and does differ from the experience of adults and that it needs to inform decision-making processes. Its limitations, therefore, do not invalidate the process. For example, there are legitimate situations where democratically elected politicians at local or national level consult with children in order to improve services,

to find out how effective policies are, to identify the implications of legislation. They remain responsible for decision-making in these spheres, and cannot delegate that responsibility. However, they are more accountable if, in doing so, they are able to reflect the real concerns of those people – in this case, children – on whom their decisions impact.

Processes of consultation can take place at all levels from small community projects to international events. They can either be one-off events, part of a sustained activity, or long-term or permanent structures. One-off events will focus on obtaining information from children in connection with a particular issue or event. It will be a short-term involvement, for the children will play no role other than providing their knowledge and views to the adults initiating the process. More sustained activities can facilitate a greater level of involvement by children in the design of the initiative. Children are enabled to have more input into the methodologies used, the questions to be addressed, and how findings are interpreted and used. There are also many examples of consultative structures that have been established by local, regional and national governments on a long-term or permanent basis as mechanisms to provide regular input by children and young people into the development of proposed legislation and policy and feedback that already exist.

Examples of consultative processes

Euronet consultation on discrimination and social exclusion of children, Brussels, 2000[12]

Euronet, a European children's rights network, wanted to find out whether children felt discriminated against as children, what impact this had on their lives and whether they wanted greater opportunities to participate in political decisions at national and European level. They undertook a consultation in five countries through group discussions, questionnaires, interviews conducted by children themselves, national seminars and finally a joint meeting of representatives of young people in the five participating countries. The goal was to produce a set of recommendations to be presented to the European Union institutions. These findings were then presented by the children themselves at a seminar organized at the European Parliament.

Comment – The children were identified through the membership of Euronet at national level and they then consulted with a wide range of children within their own countries. Although the initiative was conceived by adults, once the core group of children were identified, they played a significant part in designing and developing the project. The final recommendations, based on the consultation process were prepared and produced by the children with adults playing a supportive and facilitating role. The project demonstrated that children from different countries and cultures, and without a common language were able to collaborate and work effectively towards a shared goal. The findings of the consultation also revealed a considerable degree of consistency in their concerns over the rights of children in respect of democracy and citizenship, violence, education.

Children's Parliament in Slovenia[13]

In Slovenia, when parliamentary democracy was introduced in 1990, a Children's Parliament was also established. Each year, children in schools are introduced to a chosen topic and provided with the opportunity to learn about it in depth. Over 100 young people aged between 13-15 years are elected through their schools to meet at the Slovenian Parliament to discuss this issue. At the end of the session, they choose the topic for the following year. In the first year, the issue was 'A Safe and Healthy Environment'. But by the time of the second Parliament, the picture had dramatically changed. War had broken out in Slovenia, in Croatia and finally in Bosnia. The young people used the Parliament to express their concerns over the future and complaints at the failure of the politicians to develop effective government. They articulated their anger, fear and sense of betrayal – over the war, a sense of not being protected, over the failure of schools to provide an appropriate edu-

12 Agenda 2000 for Children and Young People in Europe, Euronet, Brussels, 2000

13 *Monitoring Children's Rights*, edited E. Verhellen, DCI/Martinus Nijhoff, 1996

cation. The politicians were willing to listen and brought to the Parliament a progress report on the recommendations from the previous parliament. Although this contained only a few concrete accomplishments, it did demonstrate to the children that their concerns were being taken seriously. The third parliament focused on creating child friendly schools. Unlike the previous year, the focus was on concrete suggestions for improvement rather than criticism. In 1993, the topic was friendship without violence – a recognition of the need for children to take responsibility for their own behaviour while also acknowledging that the adult world had to address issues of drug abuse, violence associated with alcohol, the powers of adults to abuse children, violence in the media and the existence of war.

Comment – The critical factor in ensuring that the Parliament was not merely a tokenistic gesture was that the politicians demonstrated that they were willing to listen, to give consideration to the proposals and issues raised by the children and act where possible. In addition, the process demonstrated that the children were able to develop their own sense of democratic responsibility, as they recognised that they were being taken seriously.

Children's Parliament in Zimbabwe[14]

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) has declared an annual 'Day of the African Child'. In Zimbabwe, the President decided to celebrate the event by establishing an annual Children's Parliament. The theme each year is chosen by the OAU. Potential members of the Children's Parliament are chosen in schools and they compete through speech writing and public speaking to represent their constituency at the parliamentary session. The delegates come from both primary and secondary schools and are elected for one year. The Parliament lasts for one day with one day allocated for rehearsals. Child MPs are allocated two minutes each to speak on the chosen theme. Adult ministers attend and respond to the child parliamentarians' contributions after which the children return home.

Comment – While giving children the chance to address their concerns directly to government is an important step, the capacity of this initiative to enable children to make a significant contribution to the political agenda is inhibited by a number of factors identified by the Child MPs themselves:

- There is no clear criteria for selection and in practice, the children tend to be chosen by virtue of being head girls or boys, good academic performance and competence in English. There is also a lack of representation of children who are out of school.
- Child MPs lack any opportunity to meet together to share ideas in advance of the Parliament and there is a tendency to perceive the event as a competition leading to a reluctance to exchange information.
- Children are not provided with any training on their role as MPs.
- There is no programme of funding for participation in the Parliament, which seriously restricts the opportunities for children to undertake any activities in connection with the role.
- There is no follow-up to the Parliament itself, leaving Child MPs with no role or activities. The views articulated at the Parliament are not pursued and the Child MPs are unable to play a continuing role as children's rights advocates. The children lack any support from influential adults who could help them utilize their role as Child MPs more effectively.
- No systematic records are kept of the Children's Parliament, undermining any opportunity for a serious response to be made by adults to the concerns raised by the children. Nor is there any record of past or present Child MPs.

Multimedia consultation with disabled children and young people, UK, 2000[15]

The Children's Society, an NGO, carried out consultation with children and young people with disabilities to gain their views and experiences of the services they receive under a local

14 *Our Right to be Heard: Voices from Child Parliamentarians in Zimbabwe*, Save the Children, London, 2000

15 Details taken from correspondence from the project leader to the author

authority scheme to provide them with services. Six projects took part, all with expertise in this area and involving 200 children and young people in all. The consultation focused on their views as those who have experienced programmes dealing with the transition to adulthood, play and leisure, residential care, and assessment and review processes. It included children with physical disabilities, sensory impairments and learning difficulties.

The consultation process has differed from traditional forms by using a multimedia approach. The use of drama, song, art, animation, stories and video diaries are just some of the methods that are used to gain the views of children and young people. This approach has enabled them to convey their experiences and views through a medium of their choice.

A core group of young people involved in the consultation were trained and paid as researchers. Their task was to work with groups of children and young people and support them to put their views into a multimedia presentation recorded on CD-ROM. The findings of the consultation will be presented in a set of CDs in February 2001.

Comment – This project highlights the importance of offering children creative and varying methods of imparting their ideas and experiences, particularly those who might have difficulties using more conventional approaches. For example, some children, who were in care of the local authority, wanted to participate in the regular reviews that take place to monitor their progress, but feel intimidated by participating in a meeting of adult professionals. However, they were able to express their views when offered the opportunity to produce a presentation using video or powerpoint.

The project also demonstrates that children with disabilities, like all other children, are able to act as researchers when properly trained and supported, and in the process gained enormous confidence, self-esteem and a sense of achievement.

Youth councils, France[16]

Youth councils have been in operation in France since the 1970s and there are now several hundred in existence. Their role is to articulate the concerns of children and young people about their local communities. In 1991, the National Association for Children and Youth Town Councils was founded. Its first annual meeting was attended by 700 young people and 400 adults and subsequent meetings have been attended by government ministers. The achievements of the youth councils have been significant, including the creation of skateboard slopes, spaces for children with disabilities, a cartoon library, improved transport facilities, social events, creation of town maps in Braille and videos depicting children and young people's concerns about their towns.

Comment – Both the numbers of youth councils and their sustained existence point to the seriousness with which such bodies are viewed in France. An important element in their scope and effectiveness has been the political commitment to them both at national and local level. They are widely seen as an effective means of including young people within their local communities.

Derby children's hospital, UK, 1992[17]

When a new children's hospital was to be built, 130 children were invited to participate in group discussions and workshops to find out what they wanted from the hospital. The children were drawn from local primary and secondary schools and they were asked what they liked and disliked about going to hospital and what might be improved. The consultation began before any work had been undertaken by the architects. The work with the children gave the project teams ideas not only about the type of building and environment children wanted but also how they wanted the hospital run. The architects found the process instructive and creative. Some of the ideas from the children included better play areas and lowered reception desks where children could check in by themselves.

Comment – In this initiative, there was a genuine attempt to involve children before any decisions about the hospital had been made. There was therefore a real possibility for the

16 *Hear! Hear!* C. Willow, Local Government Information Unit, London 1997.
17 Ibid.

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children's suggestions to be incorporated. It was clear from the beginning that the children's role was to contribute their thoughts and ideas, but that all final decisions would rest with the health authority responsible for the hospital.

2.4.2 Participative initiatives

Participative initiatives usually offer greater opportunities for the active involvement of children themselves in projects, research or services. Participative initiatives are characterized by the following elements:

- They are initiated by adults;
- They involve collaboration with children;
- They will involve the creation of structures through which children can challenge or influence outcomes;
- They will usually involve children taking self-directed action once the project is underway.

In other words, although the work is initiated by adults, it does involve partnership with children and necessitates some sharing of power between adults and children and renegotiation of traditional relationships between them. Projects that begin as consultative exercises frequently move on to become participative as the adults and children explore new ways of working together. They will allow direct input from children and will be shaped and informed by them. Such initiatives can include, for example:

- **Participative projects that seek to involve children as partners** – such projects may address important areas of children's lives where they are experiencing difficulties, where rights are not being respected, where children want to achieve change. They may also focus on the improvement or development of new services.
- **Research involving children as researchers** – projects that enable children to define the research agenda and investigate the lives of children themselves.
- **Democratic schools** – many schools in many countries continue to operate on authoritarian and undemocratic lines. Children themselves consistently identify their treatment in schools as a key area of concern. Strategies to introduce child-friendly schools where children are valued as partners and not just seen as passive recipients of adult expertise are vital to the development of more effective and respectful education.

Giving children the opportunity to organize together gives them greater strength, access to more information and self confidence. They are then better equipped to highlight abuses or neglect of their rights, challenge the relevant authorities to take action where necessary and act more effectively to protect their own rights

Examples of participative projects

Child-to-Child project, Nicaragua[18]

Annual workshops are held in Nicaragua by the Centro de Informacion y Servicios de Asesoria en Salud to enable children from different regions to meet and share experiences from their local Child-to-Child projects. Children in Managua have identified unemployment, economic problems, lack of adequate affordable schools, lack of a health centre, lack of organization in the community, dirty ditches, unclean water sources and streets full of rubbish as issues of concern. They decided to prioritize them and concluded that lack of community organization was at the heart of all the problems. Accordingly, they decided to organize themselves and others to begin to clear up the rubbish in their streets.

Comment – These children demonstrated a capacity to engage with the realities of their day-to-day lives at a number of levels. First, they were able to identify a broad range of factors that had a negative impact on their lives. They were then able to analyse the relationship between those factors and the concept of cause and effect. Finally they demonstrated a capacity and a willingness to translate that analysis into practical action to improve their local environment. The extent to which these children felt empowered to make a difference to their own lives is particularly impressive.

18 *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*, R. Hart, UNICEF, New York, 1997

Child participation with marginalised youth projects, Jamaica[19]

Save the Children's marginalised youth projects have been developed over a number of years as a non-institutional approach to reintegrating street and working children into society. During that period they have undergone considerable transition.

- Initially, programme activities were provided to give children the option of selecting those that interested them. The children had no input to the content or range of activities available. The scheme was perceived as a welfare service from which they made demands but to which they had no responsibilities or loyalty.
- In the second stage, children were allowed to give their ideas on activities although staff gave no commitment that they would act on any feedback. The parameters were confined to issues such as preferences in recreational activities. Despite its limitations, this change produced significant impact. The staff realised that children could be more actively engaged in planning and implementation and were forced to check their assumptions and programme plans. It also led to some adults feeling threatened, especially parents who worked as volunteers in the programme. As a result, workshops for adults on children's rights were introduced, which helped to make them less resistant to listening to the children.
- This led to the next stage in which programme staff began to share programme plans with the children for their input and support. The pre-existing parent/staff management group now included children chosen by their peers. These youth representatives also met with their peers without adults present. While there were initial difficulties – irregular meetings and inability to maintain order, the children began to develop confidence and to initiate and sustain new schemes.
- Following on from these developments, an Environmental Protector's Club was established. Initially controlled by adults, the children gradually began to share the responsibilities as they displayed increasing leadership capacities.

Comment – This project is an interesting example of the capacity of an initiative to evolve as both adults and children become more trusting of each other. It also indicates that children's ownership of projects enables them to acquire skills and confidence. One important issue that has emerged is that although the projects have a higher ratio of boys to girls, there is a reverse proportion in leadership. It is the girls who demonstrate the greatest interest and commitment to participation, probably as a consequence of having lives in which there is more structure and guidance than is experienced by boys. The programme is therefore seeking ways of engaging the motivation and engagement of boys.

Voices of Filipino Children[20]

This UNICEF project is designed to raise awareness and understanding among disadvantaged children aged between 7-17 about their rights and responsibilities. By using photographs, illustrations, essays, and media formats, the children have been enabled to communicate with both adults and other children on their concept of rights and responsibilities and how their rights are realised or violated. The project runs workshops where groups of children are invited to express their views in ways that are non-conventional and non-threatening. During 1999/2000 two workshops were held in Manila to provide children with basic broadcasting skills including scriptwriting, announcing, interviewing and field reporting. In one of the workshops, the children conceptualised a radio programme about and for children, which was later developed and is still being broadcast. Similar workshops were held in three provinces where the child participants also air their own radio programmes. In another initiative, 72 street children were taught the basics of photography and allowed to express themselves through the medium. The photographs they took were exhibited in the Philippine Senate on the 10th anniversary of

19 *Stepping Forward: Children and Young People's Participation in the Development Process*, ed. V. Johnson, et al. Intermediate Technology Publications, London, 1998

20 Details taken from correspondence from UNICEF to the author

the Convention on the Rights of the Child in December 1999.

Comment – This initiative is managed by adults but explores child-centred approaches to encouraging children to articulate and share their experiences. By providing the children with the opportunities to acquire new skills, the children are empowered to begin to develop their own initiatives and activities.

Girl Child Project, Pakistan[21]

The Girl Child Project was established to empower girls and women to improve their status in families and communities by raising awareness of their situation and its implications for community well-being and development. By the end of 2001, the Project plans to reach 500 locations and 25,000 girls in urban slums and rural areas. The methodology has been first to involve local communities, including men and women in a process of assessment and analysis of the situation of women, children and girls. The community then has to reach a consensus on initiating the project in their area without which it will not proceed. The community then selects 50 girls to participate. After an initial orientation, the girls views are taken into consideration about how the next level of training is provided. The girls are provided with awareness raising on the equal rights of girls and women and opportunities are provided for them to acquire knowledge and skills, for example on health issues, leadership skills, first aid, income generation skills. The training packages involve role plays, drawings, and activities encouraging joint planning and team work. As a result of the project, the girls are demonstrating confidence to act as role models which is beginning to have a positive impact on the status of girls and women in their communities.

Comment – Of critical significance in this project is the recognition that there is a need to work with, rather than against, local communities. Seeking the collaboration and participation of both men and women provides the project with legitimacy that will strengthen the opportunities of girls to participate fully. While the methodology affirms the power of adults to determine the girl's involvement, the long-term outcome is to create a cultural shift in which girls can begin to gain more independence, greater confidence to express themselves, and assert their equal rights.

One of the interesting outcomes of the project was that the girls themselves pointed out the need to initiate special projects for boys. Working with girls alone was creating an imbalance: as they grew in confidence and self-esteem, they began to see a growing difference between themselves and the boys. They felt that boys needed opportunities to participate in productive activities that would help them focus in positive directions. Accordingly the following project was developed (see below).

Brothers join Meena, Pakistan[22]

The aim of the project is to empower adolescent boy scouts to play a part in promoting and protecting children's rights to health and girls' right to education. It employs an approach that first trains the boy scouts on rights issues, interpersonal communication and data collection using participatory and interactive methods, role plays and the use of the Meena materials – a multimedia package produced by UNICEF and its partners to promote the rights of the girl child. The boys then collect data from 10 neighbouring households on health, sanitation and educational status of the children. In return, they give each household information on the need to immunize children under one year, on hygiene and the construction of household latrines, and urge parents to send girls to school. They then monitor the progress of each household in these areas. The project is currently being piloted in one province. If successful, it is hoped that eventually 10,000 boy scouts will reach 100,000 households and convince more than 500,000 people in their communities to support education for girls.

Comment – This project is unusual in that it involves a commitment to raising awareness of the rights of children but is not designed to help the boys involved use that knowledge to

21 As above
22 As above

promote and protect their own rights. Rather, it encourages and empowers them to take action to promote and protect the rights of others – for example, babies and girls. In so doing it is building an understanding of social responsibility and a recognition that everyone has a part to play in creating a society in which the rights of all people are respected.

Examples of research with children

A number of projects have been initiated using children as researchers to define and investigate the experiences of children.

Justice for children, Bangladesh[23]

In 1999, Save the Children UK initiated a research project to investigate abuses of children imprisoned in jail and state shelter homes in Bangladesh. The reason for using children themselves as researchers was to enable them to express the problems and possible solutions in their own words. Fourteen street children were involved in consulting among themselves, with other children and with NGOs over a period of two years, at the end of which they decided to make a video, focusing on the experiences of three children in the group, to disseminate their overall findings and views.

In September 2000, Save the Children organized a workshop with NGOs, government agencies, donor agencies, the media and individual activists to examine the findings and develop more systematic coordination of activity to promote justice for children in this field. The children who had worked as researchers suggested that a similar workshop should be arranged for children. Accordingly, 120 children aged between 10-18 years from a variety of social backgrounds were invited to attend a consultation meeting on 'State violence against children'. They included children living and/or working on the street, children with disabilities, and slum children, as well as some from more privileged backgrounds. Their discussions prompted a number of recommendations directed at the prison authorities, the courts, NGOs, the media, politicians and children themselves. They wanted these recommendations to be shared with other interested organizations and sent to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. They also requested a follow-up meeting to develop a strategy to take their recommendations forward.

Comment – Involving children as researchers has a number of benefits. It enables children, from their own experience to frame the research agenda. Children will often be more prepared to open up to other children. The process also provides opportunities for children to acquire skills and confidence. However, it is important that the children are provided with training and support and that a clear ethical framework is developed for the project, addressing issues such as the need for children to understand the voluntary nature of participation in the research and the need to respect confidentiality.

This project highlights the capacity of children to take responsibility once they are treated with respect and helped to acquire the necessary competence. Having been given the opportunity to undertake the research, they then took the initiative to use the findings in order to develop a strategy for action. It was their idea to hold the children's workshop out of which came detailed recommendations and a programme for future action.

Participatory research on child labour in Vietnam[24]

This research programme was conducted in 1997 to obtain a better understanding of the extent and nature of child labour. It involved children in a process of data-gathering through a range of methods including semi-structured interviews and discussions, diagramming, listing, scoring and photography. Methods were developed in accordance with children's capabilities. The children participated with enthusiasm and their active involvement provided a new perspective on the lives of working children and demonstrated to adult community members that children have important experi-

23 'Justice for Children': Summary report of the Consultation on State Violence against Children with 120 children held on 6 September 200, Dhaka, Bangladesh, Save the Children UK, 2000

24 See footnote 19

ences and opinions to contribute that differ from those of adults.

Comment – The involvement of children in this project was limited to the collection of data. They were not included in the development of the research plan, analysing data or presenting the research findings. In other words, their involvement was limited by the adults to a pre-determined set of tasks. The project itself concluded that, as a result, it failed to extend and promote children's own capabilities and ingenuity and that in future, children should be more actively involved in developing and revising the research plans.

Listening to the voice of young people, Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic, 1998[25]

The Vientiane Municipality, together with Save the Children, undertook a participatory research project to elicit the views of young people, train a group of young people in leadership skills, develop a model for children's participation and identify responses and services for young people based on the findings. A Working Committee of the participating departments was established, identifying six topics to be addressed by the research and developing draft materials for discussion groups on these topics. The Committee subsequently decided that young people should contribute to the choice of topics. Four young people were invited to join the Committee and provide their views. The training materials were amended accordingly. The research was conducted by trained young people chosen according to clear criteria – age 18-25, of secondary school standard, neither rich nor poor and outgoing and confident.

The research was carried out with children in age groups 13-15 years and 16-18 years and according to whether they were in or out of school. Each group met six times to discuss each of the selected topics. In all, 280 group discussions were held involving 384 children. The data was collected via a tape recorder (with the permission of the children), through notes, completed forms and the collection of drawings and other materials made during the process. The researchers met each week to share problems and information. The data were analysed and a report produced. The longer-term goal of the project was to identify, through the research, issues of particular concern to the children, and to develop initiatives in response. Life skills and HIV/AIDS emerged as a priority and the young researchers are now developing a project on this issue.

Comment – One of the strengths of this project was the commitment built in from the beginning to act on the findings of the research and to utilize the acquired skills of the researchers to develop further initiatives. This gives purpose to the research and validates the children's participation. The decision to bring young people into the process of defining the subject areas to be covered was a positive step. It is not the case that priorities for adults will always be shared by children and young people and the research needed to address issues that they felt to be relevant.

It is important in such a project that the findings are fed back to the children – that they have a chance to see the report and how their contributions have been recorded. Ideally they should be enabled to comment at the draft stage, although where very large numbers of children are involved this may be impractical because of cost and time. It is not clear from the report on the research process whether any feedback was given to the children.

Examples of democratic schools

Hojas Anchas School, Colombia[26]

The New School programme in Colombia has been developed in response to the difficulties many poor rural children face in managing the competing demands of education and agricultural work. It has introduced a flexible curriculum with mixed-age classrooms that allow children to learn individually and in groups, with the teacher able to function as a facilitator. These schools have also developed structures enabling children to function as a coordinated

25 *Listening to the Voice of Young People*, Lao Vientiane Municipality/ Save the Children, Vientiane, 2000
26 See footnote 18

democratic community. Because this innovative approach makes radically different demands on teachers, they have been supported through weekly teacher-to-teacher meetings between schools of each district, enabling them to help each other manage the change.

The Hojas Anchas school is one that has made children's participation in protection of the local environment an integral part of the school's role as a community-based centre for democratic learning. For example, it has developed a forest conservation project in which the children are trying to stop the erosion of the mountain slope by planting native species of trees. Although the idea for the project almost certainly originated with the teachers, the children now feel complete ownership of the initiative. Part of the challenge of the project is for the children to educate local villagers about the problem of using wood for firewood and for sale. The children collect seeds from existing trees and bring them to the school to establish a nursery that will, with the collaboration of local adults, restock the slopes with native trees. As part of the initiative many of the children have attended the local village government meetings.

Comment – This project has contributed a number of positive elements to the lives of the participating children. They are learning through practice about their local environment and how it can be sustained. They are developing skills in democratic participation by sharing their ideas and seeking to persuade adults of their opinions. They are taking responsibility for both the process and the outcomes of the project. Additionally, in both this initiative and in the teacher support programmes of the 'New Schools' generally, there is recognition that adults, as well as children, have to learn if participative democracy involving children is to be successful.

Highfield School, UK[27]

Highfield is a junior school (7-11 years) in a particularly deprived area of England. It had been characterized by high levels of violence, disaffection, bullying and truancy. In the early 1990s, a new Head Teacher decided to involve the whole school community in making the school a safe and effective educational environment. In order to achieve this goal she consulted all the children, as well as teachers and administrative staff on what changes were needed to make the school a safer place. The outcomes of the consultation included:

- The establishment of a school council in which children have genuine power. The school council is involved, for example, in the development of all school policies and in the recruitment of staff;
- The creation of a bullying box where children could, in confidence, give information about having been bullied;
- The appointment of 'guardian angels' – children who volunteered to befriend children who were without friends, being bullied, or simply in need of support;
- Child mediators who would help children resolve conflicts in the playground.

As a result of these changes, the school became highly popular, the children were happier, achieved better educational results, and acquired considerable skills of negotiation, democratic decision-making and social responsibility.

Comment – Very young children are capable of accepting considerable levels of responsibility when given trust and support. What emerges from this experience is that children can act to protect themselves and others when their rights are respected. The provision of training and encouragement for the child mediation system enabled the children to act to help each other without having to turn to adults, although the adults were there if they were needed. By respecting the rights of the children, they were then able to understand the importance of respecting the rights of others, and of taking responsibility to ensure this respect.

2.4.3 Promoting self-advocacy

Self-advocacy is a process of empowering children themselves to take action to address those issues that they see as important. It has the following characteristics:

27 'Changing Our Behaviour: Promoting Positive Behaviour by the Staff and Pupils of Highfield Junior School', P. Alderson, Highfield Junior School/Institute of Education, London, 1997

- The issues of concern are identified by children themselves;
- The role of adults is to facilitate, not lead;
- The process is controlled by the children.

It is rooted in a commitment to allow children to define their situation and to develop strategies for the changes they wish to pursue. It requires a clear recognition on the part of adults that they must concede the power to control the process and outcomes in favour of a collaborative relationship with children. It does, however, involve a continuing role for adults in the capacity of, for example, advisers, supporters, administrators and fund-raisers.

Examples of self advocacy

Programme of Working Children, Ecuador[28]

The Programme is a national organization that has promoted the participation of working children in a widespread environmental project. The staff work with children in 'Alternative Spaces' throughout the country, established to create opportunities for children living in poor urban environments to learn to defend their rights. In 1993, the Programme's annual conference decided that the Programme would focus on the environment in the future. Working in collaboration with a national network of ecologists, the Programme trained youth units of four or five teenagers who in turn worked with as many as 80 younger children. Together, they created ecological maps of their own environments, identifying problems they wished to address and strategies for tackling them. They were trained to work with the media, seeking to raise public awareness of adult responsibility for action to create safer and more sustainable environments.

Comment – This Programme was able to establish projects reaching a total of 70,000 children in 21 provinces by empowering older children to work with young children. By involving ecologists as advisers at the earliest stages, the children were guided to initiatives that were feasible and the practical training in handling the media gave the children the skills with which to promote and disseminate their ideas. Some of the projects were confrontational in that the children condemned those responsible for environmental degradation. It could be argued that in the longer term, an approach based on dialogue, which seeks to engage the adult community in the children's perceptions and concerns may be a more effective strategy for lasting change.

Article 12, UK[29]

In 1995, young people on the Management Council of an NGO, the Children's Rights Development Unit (CRDU), organized a conference of 60 children and young people to decide whether there should be a national organization run by and for children under the age of 18 years to promote their right to be heard. The participants, who came from a wide range of social, economic and ethnic backgrounds, decided that they did want such an organization and the CRDU agreed to facilitate the process and provide help with administration, fundraising, publicity and recruitment. The young people established a steering group of 25 young people who raised the money for an adult support worker to manage the day-to-day running of the office. However, all decisions and activities are led by the children themselves. The organization, called Article 12, now has more than 400 members. It is campaigning for greater democracy in schools, lowering the voting age and an end to physical punishment of children. Its members speak at conferences, talk to the media, run seminars, meet with politicians and contribute their expertise to working groups of other NGOs. In 1998, the members undertook a consultation with children on how far they felt their rights to be heard were respected. This consultation report was submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, ready for its consideration when it next examines the UK Government on its record of CRC implementation.

Comment – The children recognised from the outset that, as they were in full time education, it was not possible for them to run the office of the organization and that they would need to appoint adult help. They identified areas where they needed the adult expertise

28 See footnote 18

29 See 'Respect: a Report into how well Article 12 of the UNCRC is put into practice across the UK', Article 12, London, 1999

and skills that they lacked. However, they also recognised the inherent dangers that, in making such an appointment, the adult would become the effective 'manager' of the organization. They tackled this by drafting a very explicit constitution setting out how decisions should be made and producing a job description in which the role of the adult support worker was tightly defined and controlled. Nobody over 18 years is allowed to make any policy decisions within the organization.

There is no lower age limit for Article 12 and it has recruited children to the steering committee who are as young as nine years old. Its work has demonstrated that children of different ages can work together collaboratively and effectively.

Although Article 12 has been running successfully for a number of years, it remains extremely difficult to raise the funds to sustain it. There is considerable adult resistance to accepting that children are capable of managing their own organization, despite evidence to the contrary, and the children have to battle against continuing prejudice from funders.

Butterflies Programme of Street and Working Children[30]

Butterflies works with around 800 children living and working on the streets of New Delhi, empowering them with the skills and knowledge to protect themselves and develop as respected and productive citizens. Its approach has centred on the establishment of a team of street educators who build trusting relationships with the children and involve them in a range of activities such as non-formal education, saving schemes, recreational activities and health programmes at various contact points. Children participate in planning most of the activities through a Children's Council that meets every month, attended by representatives who bring issues raised by the children at each contact point. These meetings enable children to discuss and share information, analyse various social and political events and work towards collective action. They discuss, for example, drugs, police harassment, non-payment of wages, the need for better jobs, and the problem of gambling. The Council orients the programme and gives children the opportunity to learn the principles of democracy. A number of concrete initiatives have resulted, including a Child Workers Union, a Credit Union and the Child Workers Voice. The Council has also empowered them to take legal action when their rights have been violated. The children not only plan most of their activities but also contribute materially towards them. The obligation to contribute adds to the sense of ownership of the programme and a commitment to ensuring its success.

Comment – Crucial to the success of the programme is a process of forming respectful relationships with the children and enabling them to participate in their own forums to identify the issues that concern them. The programme demonstrates not only that children are capable of participating and contributing towards the development and running of programmes, but also that programmes are more effective when children are directly involved.

However, of equal importance is the recognition that adults have to be prepared to concede power to share decisions with the children. Indeed, the greatest barriers faced by the children are the negative attitudes of many adults: employers, community members and official bodies who believe that they know best and lack belief in children's capacity to participate, and the police and general public who see the children as thieves rather than individuals struggling to survive. Also, the parents of those children living at home are often reluctant to allow them to participate in the programmes. Butterflies highlights the need to educate adults, raising their awareness of the importance of respecting children's rights and acknowledging children's own active participation in the exercise of those rights.

Children's clubs, Nepal[31]

Children's clubs, managed to a large extent by

30 Details taken from correspondence from project worker to author

31 'The Children's Clubs of Nepal: A Democratic Experiment', Summary and recommendations from a study of Children's Clubs support by Save the Children Norway and Save the Children US, 1999

children themselves, have developed as a new kind of institution over the past decade. A major factor in their development has been the desire among NGOs and development agencies working with children, to fulfil the commitments of the CRC on participation. There are now many hundreds of such clubs within Nepal. Many evolved from Child-to-Child training programmes in villages, some were initiated as a result of childrens' requests, and others were created as a result of the influence of the Hatemalo children's radio programme. Most involve children between the ages of 8-16, although some include young people up to 18 years of age.

The members of clubs generally meet once or twice a month and take part in a range of activities including dancing and singing, theatre, community development work, reading and writing, debates, play and recreation, and children's rights awareness. They usually have organizational structures similar to those of adult organizations in which children themselves serve in all the responsible roles.

Comment – Research undertaken by SCF Norway and SCF US on the approximately 130 clubs initiated by their organizations highlight a number of interesting observations:

- **Inclusion**

They are well-balanced in terms of gender compared with other institutional settings. In general they also appear to reflect the ethnic mix within local communities, although minority groups are less likely to participate in the executive structures, and they do include children who are not in school. However, children with disabilities are significantly under-represented. This is a cause for concern as these children are already isolated in their communities and the clubs could offer a unique opportunity to address the profound discrimination they experience.

- **Self-determination by children themselves**

Most clubs were initiated by adults but, as they have developed, have begun to be managed by the children themselves. Generally speaking, adults now play an advisory role, although some clubs are still influenced by dominant adults. However, it is the members of the executive committees, rather than the full membership, that tend to determine the running of the club. Furthermore, the organizational structures tend to replicate those of adult institutions rather than allowing new forms of organization and democracy to evolve from the children themselves.

- **Outcomes for children**

The clubs offer significant opportunities for children's personal development, giving them skills and experience not available to them in other settings. There is evidence of children gaining in confidence, learning about democratic decision-making, planning and organization, community development and human rights and violations of rights. One of the opportunities most valued by the children is the time spent socialising with their peers. The clubs are likely to produce long-term benefits by encouraging work in collaboration with others and participation in community decision-making. Through the clubs' training programmes, children also acquire skills in health care, understanding the environment and childcare.

- **Adult attitudes**

Most parents seem to think that the clubs have a positive impact on children's studies, self-development, and confidence. Some also welcome the opportunities provided for children to play. Many parents actively support the clubs by helping to plan events, providing financial help, sharing ideas and experience and networking with other village institutions.

- **Children's recommendations for the future**

Most children identified the need for greater financial support and stability. Many clubs lack the resources for their own clubhouse, for example. The children also express a need for a wider variety of activities, more informed participation by their members, improvements in working relationships and the need for a sense of ownership by all members. They would also like to see more awareness within their local communities of the clubs, and a more positive attitude from adults towards them.

3. INVOLVING CHILDREN IN CONFERENCES

One of the most widely used, visible and perhaps contentious strategies for involving children in recent years has been through their participation in conferences. While the principles and practical lessons detailed above apply equally to conferences as to other forms of child involvement, conferences do raise a number of additional questions and concerns that justify special attention. They can take place at the local, community, regional, national and international level. Although the logistics, time and costs involved obviously vary according to the scope of the event, the questions to be addressed are broadly the same.

3.1 QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS

- Why a conference involving children?
- What is the role of children in the conference?
- Will children be invited to the planning stage of the conference?
- Which children will be invited to participate in the conference and how?
- At what stage will children be involved?
- How will children be prepared before they take part?
- What is the role of adults in the conference?
- Where will the conference be held?
- What are the intended outcomes of the conference?

3.1.1 Why a conference involving children?

It is essential to give careful consideration to why you want to run a conference involving children. Conferences involve a great deal of time, resources and planning. They remove children from their day-to-day environment into an unfamiliar arena. You need to be sure that it is the most effective means of furthering their aims as well as yours, and that there is a genuine benefit in seeking children's involvement. You need to consider whether their involvement is an end in itself or a means of achieving longer term goals. Children should never be invited simply because the organizers feel they ought to do so or that it would be 'nice' to have some children involved. For example, is the aim to:

- benefit adults by sharing the knowledge and experience of children?
- provide an opportunity for children to come together to share their ideas and thinking to benefit them in their existing organizations and institutions?
- launch a new project, programme or campaign?
- provide children with an opportunity to learn skills of organization, democratic decision-making, etc?
- empower children to begin to influence politicians, policy makers and professionals?
- demonstrate to adults that children have a valuable and worthwhile contribution to make?

Once you are clear about the purpose of the conference, it will be easier to plan the programme and the nature of children's involvement in the process.

3.1.2 What is the role of children in the conference?

You will need be clear and open from the outset about the role children will play in the conference. As with all other projects, their role can range from merely being consulted on their views to sharing responsibility for the

event. For example, is the event:

- an adult conference to which children are invited to give a presentation;
- a conference organized by adults with children invited as speakers and delegates;
- a conference organized by adults in collaboration with children;
- a conference run by and for children, with adult support.

Each of these options will involve differing levels of contribution from the children and will necessitate their involvement at different stages of the process. Where a conference primarily for children or a joint event involving children and adults is envisaged, children will obviously play a full role as participating delegates. They may be involved in planning, speaking, participating in workshops, production of conference reports (see following sections). However, if the event is primarily for adults with children making a contribution, their input will be much more circumscribed. Where children are making presentations, it is important that they are properly briefed in advance about the aims of the conference, the age and make-up of the audience and what will be expected of them.

3.1.3 Will children be invited to the planning stage of the conference?

Many of the most effective conferences are those that have engaged children from the outset so that they can be involved in defining the aims, the format, the content and planned outcomes. You will need to consider the following the questions:

- Will children be involved in the planning process?
- At what stage will they be invited to participate in the planning and design of the event?
- What status will they have? Will their views prevail? Will there be an equal partnership between adults and children? Are children being consulted while adults remain responsible for decisions?
- Has adequate time been allocated to enable their involvement to be effective?

Some of the planning issues that will need to be addressed, and on which children will be able to make a valuable contribution, will include:

- Will the conference follow a broadly conventional adult formula – plenary presentations, workshops and feedback?
- Will alternative forms of presentation be explored – drama, poetry, role play, interactive sessions, games, art exhibitions?
- Will the children be fully integrated with the adults or will there be parallel sessions where children can discuss issues separately from the adults?
- Will the conference and/or the workshops be chaired by children?
- How much time will be built in for breaks to ensure children's continued interest?
- What entertainment will be provided?

3.1.4 Which children will be invited to participate in the conference and how?

Children's legitimacy to participate can derive from a number of factors:

- Some children can represent the membership of an organization with which they are actively involved. Their potential expertise derives from a knowledge of the work of the organization and experience of participation in that organization. In other words they have a competence in respect of both **organizational content** and **process.**
- Some children have a particular set of experiences that offer a unique contribution to the topic of the conference. For example, a child soldier, a refugee or a child with disabilities excluded from education can present direct accounts of the impact of discrimination, inadequate or poorly enforced legislation and government inaction that may galvanise action more effectively than any adult account. Their expertise lies in their **direct personal experience**.
- Some children may be elected through a process of nominations through schools, youth associations, clubs or NGOs. They have demonstrated a commitment to and interest in participating by standing for election and have inspired the confidence of their peers as **effective representatives**. Selection

Children as speakers at conferences

Children need to fully understand what they are being asked to do and why. For example, is it to:

- **tell 'life stories'** - a personal story can be a powerful means of articulating the experience of childhood and its powerlessness and vulnerability to abuse and neglect of rights. As such it can be an effective tool for galvanising adults into action. But it needs to be used with caution. It is important to give serious consideration to the impact on a child of repeating in public arenas, a highly emotive, painful and personal account of their life, whether the child is adequately prepared for the consequent exposure and loss of privacy and whether there is a danger of the event becoming voyeuristic with no real opportunity to use the story to illustrate broader issues and help formulate policy proposals or campaign demands. An alternative is for children to collate stories of violations and present them on behalf, and as illustrative of, the many children in their community who have suffered in this way. This is equivalent to **giving testimony** and is not subject to issues of representativeness.
- **comment on their experiences in the relevant field** – for example, in an education conference, girls might be asked to speak to describe how the existing structure, curriculum, teaching styles, teachers attitudes and so on impact on their experience of education. This can be an invaluable contribution to adult understanding. Children will have observations, insights and views that are unique to their experience as pupils and that therefore provide clear 'added value' to an otherwise adult agenda, provided they are properly prepared and supported.
- **describe the work of their organization or project** – there is a need to share ideas on children's participation and children themselves can be highly effective advocates on behalf of their own organization or project. What is important is that the information children are being asked to provide is relevant to the theme of the conference and targeted appropriately to the particular audience present. For example, if there are children in the audience who are involved in similar projects, there needs to be an opportunity for them to share their own experiences. If the audience comprises adult practitioners, the focus might be on the practical operational issues – how to run and manage the project, the forms of democratic decision-making adopted. If the audience is senior managers and policy makers, the focus might be better geared towards the aims and outcomes of the project. Children, like adults, need proper briefing if they are to be enabled to make effective presentations.
- **outline their demands for change** – again it is important that children understand the audience they are speaking to. There is little point in children standing up to demand the right to be heard if recognition has already been given to the principle and what the adults really want is ideas from the children on how to achieve that goal. It is also important for the demand to be heard to be linked to what it is that children have to say. The right to be heard is not just an end in itself. It is a means of exercising other rights. Children need to be encouraged to utilize the right to be heard to articulate their specific demands for change – more democratic schools, better protection on the streets, an end to all physical punishment and so on.

of children by adults does not provide the same legitimacy.

It is important not to impose standards of legitimacy for children that are not imposed on adults. Most adult speakers at most conferences are presenting their own personal work, opinions, or experience. No more should be demanded of children. However children should be encouraged to be critical among themselves about representation in order that such choices are not overly controlled by adults. There is a danger that adults will select 'convenient', accessible or articulate children, leading to the "professionalisation" of child

speakers who meet an adult agenda rather than speaking for children themselves.

3.1.5 At what stage will children be involved?

Planning group

If you want to involve children in the planning of a conference, you will need to decide who to invite to help in that process. If the conference is school-based, you might ask for delegates through a school council, or ask the children from each year to nominate representatives. If the conference is about a particular group of children, such as children in institutional care, you might ask NGOs working in this field to identify children who are likely to have an interest. If the conference is national or international, you may need to bring NGOs together to develop a process for seeking nominations to participate in the planning. Clearly, this takes time and needs to happen well in advance of the conference date if the process is to be meaningful.

Speakers

Where it is proposed to have children making presentations, you need to think carefully about which children are invited to do so and why. It is important that the children involved are seen to have some legitimacy both to the adults and children at the conference but also in the eyes of any children on whose behalf they might be speaking. This is obviously harder for children than adults because they, generally, lack opportunities for participation in democratic organizations, nor are they able to demonstrate legitimacy through professional status and experience. What is important is that the children are not simply hand-picked by adults.

If the conference is focused on a particular policy area, there are likely to be obvious candidates to speak. For example, if you are organizing a conference on street children, you would clearly invite those organizations working in that field to nominate a speaker. However, if the conference is a broader-based event, for example, a conference to enable children to voice their concerns to government, you might bring a number of interested NGOs together to develop a strategy for identifying speakers.

Delegates

Ensuring that all children with a legitimate interest in a conference are provided with an opportunity to attend requires considerable thought. Children are not members of professional bodies, on mailing lists, or working within government departments, NGOs or public bodies! However, these bodies may be used as a means of accessing children.

You need to consider which children are likely to be interested and then think creatively about how to contact them. Opportunities exist through schools, the Internet, NGOs, the media, magazines, local municipalities. If your conference is designed to reflect a broad range of children's voices, it is imperative to ensure that the different experiences of children in widely different circumstances are visible. Able-bodied children will not be able to reflect the lives of children with disabilities. Children in school will have little understanding of the lives of children on the street. The priorities of ethnic minority or indigenous groups are likely to differ from those of majority populations. You also need to consider what age range of children is to be invited.

3.1.6 How will children be prepared before they take part?

Children should not be expected to participate in conferences for which they have not had an opportunity to prepare. Similarly they should not be coerced into attending. Their involuntary or uninformed attendance will limit both their capacity to contribute and to benefit from the event. It is possible to help children by:

- Providing information about the conference in advance – in child-friendly formats where younger children are involved;
- Providing information on children's rights and children's participation;
- Holding workshops to help them develop their ideas and prioritize the issues they want to raise;
- Supporting them in making presentations;
- Ensuring that they understand the purpose of the conference and the outcomes which are and are not possible – it is important for children to have realistic expectations if they are not to feel let down by the process;
- Enabling them to arrive in advance of the conference to meet with other children,

share ideas, and plan their contributions. Where the conference will be held over several days and children are coming from different countries, it can be useful to have several days preparation time if possible. It will enhance both the children's confidence and their capacity to be effective participants.

3.1.7 What is the role of adults in the conference?

Where the conference involves children as participants, careful thought needs to be given to the part that adults will play in both the planning and the event itself.

Adult relationships with children

It is important to establish at the earliest possible stages how the relationships between children and adults are to be constructed if you are to avoid confusion, resentment and conflict. You will need to:

- Clarify the boundaries between decisions over which children have control and those that remain in the hands of adults. For example, if you originally intended the conference to be on one theme and the children feel that this should be changed, will you agree to allow the change? If you had intended the conference to bring adults and children together as equal participants but the children want adults to be there only as a resource, would this be acceptable? If the children feel that a residential conference would achieve better outcomes than a one day event, is this open for discussion?
- Develop a code of practice or ground rules for participating adults in both the planning stage and at the event itself. This will need to be developed alongside the children who are involved at each stage.
- Provide training for adult facilitators on children's rights and the role of the facilitator.
- Clarify whether adults are participants or supporters. Do adults have a vote? Can they contribute equally in discussions or are they there to provide administrative support, information and advice?

Adult support for children

Experience from many conferences around the world indicates that it is vital that participating children have adequate and appropriate support from adults if they are to gain the optimum value from participation. You will need to consider for example:

- The ratio of adults to children. Where the children are younger, it is advisable to have one adult for each child;
- Children's physical and emotional needs – some children may be away from home for the first time;
- Ensuring that there are adequate child protection procedures in place. This means making sure that proper systems are in place to help any child who has been inappropriately treated by an adult or another children and clear rules on confidentiality as well as chaperoning, safe transport to and from the venue and safe and secure accommodation;
- The adequate provision of interpreters so that children are not excluded by language;
- Providing clear guidelines to adults to clarify their role in relation to children;
- Being available to provide information, advice and support when needed;
- Providing encouragement and support and opportunities for rehearsal when children are preparing presentations;
- Opportunities for de-briefing after children have given a presentation or at the end of the event;
- The potential security risks for children associated with speaking out. Adults need to be aware where these risks might arise and be prepared to help children balance their desire and right to speak with the practical realities that they may face when they return home;
- Children's access to the media. They may want to the opportunity to express their views to the media but also need to understand the implications of speaking out to a very wide audience. They also need to be supported in recognising that they have the right to refuse to give interviews or to answer specific questions in an interview. Preparatory training on working with the media can be very helpful.

Adults as organizers

One of the difficulties experienced by children in an adult organized conference is that the culture, language and content of the process can seem intimidating and inaccessible. If you want to ensure the optimum involvement of

Planning adult conferences

TYPE OF EVENT

With children invited to participate.

For example:

- UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, New York, 2001
- CRC 10th Anniversary Commemorative Meeting, Geneva, 1999
- Winnipeg International Conference on War-Affected Children, 2000

ROLE OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Children will not have been involved in the design or organization of the conference. They are participating as speakers and delegates. They might be asked to:

- tell 'life stories';
- describe the work of their organization;
- comment on children's experiences in the relevant field;
- outline their demands for change.

Adults will have total responsibility for the event at all stages. In particular, they should take responsibility for ensuring that in an event designed both by and for adults, efforts are made to ensure that the children are adequately supported, made to feel welcome and treated with respect by the adult participants.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- Have the children been informed about the purpose of the conference? Do they know why it is being held, how their contribution fits in with other speakers, what they are being asked to contribute?
- What preparation have they been given in order to participate? Has it been recognised that the children might wish to present in ways other than a straight speech? Have they been forewarned if they are expected to answer questions?
- Will they be enabled to take part in all the proceedings or is there a special slot allocated for them? Are they taking part in a parallel session? Have they had any choice in this?
- Will they be able to make recommendations? Will they be given serious consideration?
- Will they have any input into follow through activities after the conference?
- Why have these particular children been invited, who do they represent and what expertise do they have?
- Has thought been given to how to introduce the children – have they been asked to provide CVs in the same way as other speakers?

children you need to consider:

- Preparing adult presenters for the fact that children will be participating and that speeches and workshop presentations need to take account of them;
- Avoiding the use of jargon, acronyms, and 'coded speech';
- Allowing time for regular breaks;
- Introducing a ground rule that children can ask for clarification at any time if what is being said is not understood;
- Ensuring that children are properly introduced;
- Treating the children as equal partners in the event and avoiding patronising them or treating them as having separate or different status.

3.1.8 Where will the conference be held?

Thought needs to be given to the venue for the conference and whether it will be in a child-friendly environment. For example, will holding it a high quality venue convey the message that the children are being valued or will it just intimidate them? On the other hand, if you hold it in a shabby school or community centre, will they feel that you are offering something less than would be offered to adults or will they feel at ease and comfortable? Children themselves will be able to advise on this.

You also need to consider:

- Is the venue accessible to people with disabilities?
- Has the provision of refreshments been

organized to accommodate children's preferences, as well as the dietary requirements of different cultural and religious groups?
- Has thought been given to entertainment for children, especially in a residential conference?
- Have the venue organizers and management been prepared for the fact that children will be participating in the conference?
- Has sleeping accommodation been arranged so that adult facilitators or support workers can be accommodated near the children with whom they have come?

3.1.9 What are the intended outcomes of the conference?

You need to be clear from the outset what your intended outcomes from the conference are, what continuing adult support will be available, and what can realistically be achieved. Too often children are provided with an opportunity to participate in an event that raises energy and expectations, develops their skills and confidence and enables them to articulate their concerns, only to be left at the end with no follow through. If children have been significantly involved in an event, they need to have the possibility of taking any conference resolutions, ideas, experiences, proposals back into their daily lives. It is important to anticipate how you will facilitate children's opportunities for future action arising from the conference. For example:
- Will you get feedback from the children in

Planning conferences organized jointly for adults and children

TYPE OF EVENT

Conferences organized jointly for adults and children to share thinking and ideas for future action on a given issue.

For example:
- Understanding with Children: coping with floods in Bangladesh, 1996
- Young People's Voices on HIV/AIDS, New Delhi, 1998

ROLE OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Children may be involved both as speakers, workshop leaders and delegates. They may also be involved in the planning process.

Adults will be involved at all stages of the event. The extent to which they share or delegate power over decision-making with the children must be negotiated at an early stage.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER
- Were children involved in the initial thinking behind the conference?
- If so, which children were invited to the planning process and why?
- What level of shared authority exists between the adults and children? Was this made explicit at the outset? How has it been negotiated?
- Which children were invited to attend the conference? Has it been organized through involvement in NGOs, through schools, existing networks of children?
- Have children been properly briefed before attending the conference? Has thought been given to the different levels of knowledge and understanding that might exist between the adult and child participants? Have the conference papers been produced in child-friendly formats?
- Have adult speakers been properly prepared for the fact that the audience will comprise children as well as adults?
- Will the children and adults remain together throughout the event or will there be an option for children to meet separately from adults to share their thinking?
- Is children's participation in the event entirely voluntary? Or are they simply 'sent' by their school, organization or institution?

Planning conferences organized with and for children

TYPE OF EVENT

Conferences organized with and for children, with adults as facilitators.

For example:

- Millenium Young People's Congress, Hawaii, 1999
- Commonwealth Children's Summit, Durban, 1999
- Forum with Working Children, Oslo, 1997
- Children's Citizenship and Environment Conference, Karakalpakstan 1999

ROLE OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Children at such events should be involved at the earliest stages of planning through to the event itself and the production of any conference report. Indeed, the initiative for the event might well come from children themselves.

They could be involved in:

- Defining aims and objectives;
- Determining the structure of the event;
- Planning the specific contributions;
- Inviting speakers;
- Chairing and presenting;
- Running workshops;
- Evaluation;
- Conference report.

Adults' role would be to offer the skills and knowledge which the children identify as necessary to support them, including, for example:

- Provide information where needed;
- Provide support in tackling problems and difficulties as they arise;
- Advise on any child protection or safety issues, particularly if the conference is residential;
- Advise on venues, administrative and organizational matters;
- Help with funding and the management of the finances;
- Help with media coverage, press releases;
- Help with dissemination of any conference outcomes.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- Were the ground rules clearly established at the beginning of the process to ensure that the role of adults remained purely facilitative? Have adult facilitators been provided with training to support them in their role?
- What consideration has been given to ensuring that more marginalised groups of children are invited to attend? For example, were children with disabilities invited, were efforts made to secure an accessible venue? Will the conference be accessible to children with different first languages? Have all relevant ethnic groups been invited? Have excluded children – out of school, on the streets, in institutions – been invited?
- Have children of different ages been invited? Has consideration been given to whether they should be grouped according to age? To interest areas? To seeking mixed age workshops?
- Has thought been given to the setting, the entertainment, cultural differences within the participants?
- Will adequate adult support be available to the children and is their role clearly defined from the outset?
- What planning has been undertaken to ensure that the outcomes from the conferences are followed through and that the children are able to use the experience of participating in projects or work in their local communities?

order to be able to evaluate both the process and the event in order to learn for future activities?

- The children may want to produce a conference report;
- They may need to feed back what happened to their reference group – NGO, school, or club;
- Ideas may have arisen for forming a local network to lobby for their local authority to take their views, for example on the environment, more seriously;
- They may want to establish school councils in their schools;
- They may want to develop a website in order to communicate with a wider range of children,
- They may want to launch a campaign, for example, to challenge levels of violence against children;
- They may want to lobby for changes in the law to better promote the rights of children;
- They may want to establish a local support group for children in similar circumstances to their own.

Remember that one-off or set piece events neither can be, nor should be, a substitute for participatory work with children in their own local communities.

3.2 RECENT EXAMPLES OF CONFERENCES INVOLVING CHILDREN

3.2.1 Adult conferences with children invited to participate

Winnipeg International Conference on War-affected Children, 2000[32]

The aim was to demonstrate the capabilities of young people to contribute to a high level, international meeting and engage them in issues that affect them, to show high-level officials that youth participation was a serious and valuable contribution to policy and programming and to assist young people in developing their skills.

A team of youth advisers was consulted in developing the overall youth programme. A summer programme of consultation and workshops was held with young people both in Canada and in war affected countries. A total of 50 young people, 25 each from Canada and the war-affected countries, were invited to participate as delegates, selected through a government funded programme and an open nomination process. They were chosen for their prior involvement, knowledge of the issue, capacity to move from personal experience to a more global analysis and levels of confidence. They were invited to arrive three days before the main conference to participate in a youth conference that provided an opportunity to meet each other, share experiences and develop common priorities. This meeting was opened by Government ministers and received considerable media and governmental interest. At the end of the three days, the young people took part in the international conference where they gave their statement, media briefings, keynote and closing addresses and undertook speaking and chairing roles in the workshops. In other words, they participated as full delegates.

Comment – This was an adult conference to which young people were invited as participants. Planning and preparation were essential to the successful outcome of this conference. The young people were given time to meet in advance, were well-prepared on the issues to be addressed at the conference and were able to gain in confidence by spending time together to share their ideas and thinking. Of equal importance was that they were genuine participants in the conference and not merely offered a token opportunity to present their statement. The positive outcomes included a core of young people to continue working – and involve other young people – in the issue, the development of an innovative model for the involvement of young people, and enthusiasm and commitment from officials and ministers.

Some of the additional lessons learned included:

- The need to plan media exposure carefully to avoid unwanted, harmful or invasive attention and to help the young people get

32 Details taken from correspondence from one of the conference organizers

their message out in the way they want;

- The importance of adequate numbers of facilitators to support the young people in exploring the issues and developing their presentations;
- The need for young people to have access to the same background documents and preparatory materials as adults. Younger participants may need additional help in deciphering these documents;
- The need for security measures to ensure the protection of young people without imposing oppressive regulation and restrictions on them;
- Concern at the impact of over-exposure of children being asked to repeat painful personal histories to different audiences.

Convention on the Rights of the Child 10th Anniversary Commemorative meeting, Geneva 1999[33]

In October 1999, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Committee on the Rights of the Child held a two day meeting to review the achievements of, and future challenges for, the CRC. UNICEF encouraged the inclusion in the meeting of a panel on child participation and the active participation of children and young people within the meeting. The process of identifying young participants was undertaken through UNICEF's 'What do you think?' initiative designed to involve children at country level to develop more effective strategies for promoting respect for their rights. Seven countries agreed to take part (Albania, Belgium, Mali, Mexico, the Netherlands, the Philippines and the UK), each sending two children and one adult facilitator. The children were aged between 11-17 years. Before coming to Geneva, the children were sent a 'child-friendly' version of the papers for the meeting and asked to prepare letters introducing themselves and their projects. They were invited to Geneva a day before the Commemorative Meeting to prepare their presentations, get to know each other and find out about the Meeting and what to expect from it.

The children participated in the opening session, with the Chairperson frequently interrupting the sequence of speakers (high level officials from key UN agencies) to ask the children for their comments and questions. The meeting then broke into three parallel sessions with some children participating in each. On the second day, the children gave their presentation consisting of three sketches addressing the importance of adults and children working together, examples from their projects of methods of promoting children's participation, and the difficulty in getting adults to take the time to listen to adults. Central to their proposals was the need for direct representation of children in international arenas, possibly through the creation of a World Parliament for Children, a proposal over which there was considerable disagreement among the adults.

Each parallel session was asked to formulate recommendations to be presented at the closing session. When the recommendations from the session to which the children had given their presentation were read out, the children expressed deep disappointment that their proposals had been disregarded and that the wording and language was difficult to follow. The chairperson, Mary Robinson, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, responded positively to their concerns, stressing that the UN was at an early stage in understanding how to listen to children and that they had a lot to learn in order to make child participation more effective.

Comment – In this meeting, the children were being invited to an adult event but efforts were made to prepare them in advance, to enable them to participate fully and to gain support from each other. The positive outcomes were that the children were able to take part in a forum normally exclusively reserved for adults and they were able to learn a great deal from each other and their very different projects and life experiences. Of particular importance was the fact that their presence provoked considerable discussion amongst the adults about the nature of child participation.

33 'Children Speak Out: A Report from the Convention on the Rights of the Child 10th Anniversary Commemorative Meeting, 29 Sept-2 Oct, 1999', UNICEF Regional Office for Europe, 1999

The key lessons learned from the process included the need for:

- Adequate preparation time;
- Children to have realistic ideas of the expected outcomes of their participation;
- Clarity about the children's 'qualifications' for participating – some adult delegates criticised the children as lacking legitimacy as representatives. However, they were all activists in their own country and were not more or less representative than the adults present at the meeting. This information should have been made available to all participants;
- A commitment to taking on board what the children say – their views should have been reflected in the recommendations even if only by acknowledging that there was no consensus on their proposals. As one child asked, *"Why did you invite us if you were not going to listen to what we had to say?"*
- The use of language that children can understand – the use of legalistic and bureaucratic UN jargon is very excluding for anyone who is not familiar with it;
- Adults to treat the children with respect as equals in the process – the expectation by the Chairperson that the children would respond instantly to the adult presentations was a demand that was not made on any of the adult participants. It put children on the spot and appeared to give them a different status from the adults present.

3.2.2 Conferences organized jointly for adults and children

Understanding with children: coping with floods in Bangladesh, 1996[34]

A participatory workshop was organized in a rural project in Bangladesh to bring children and adults together to explore the impact of riverbank erosion and floods on their lives. The workshop invited two representatives from each of five local NGOs that had been working on flood-relief and seven children were selected from poor affected families. The three-day workshop was designed to find ways of addressing the problem identified. Despite preparatory information about the workshop's purpose given to the children in advance, none of them, on arrival, were able to explain properly why they were there. Methods employed at the workshop included lectures, group discussions and presentations. The children were included in the lectures but found them difficult to follow. They were not mixed with adults for the group work and initially found it difficult to participate, particularly the girls. However, their confidence grew as the workshop progressed and they were able to express their views and make a valuable contribution to the presentations.

Comment – The experience of running this event highlights two important issues:

- First, that children cannot by brought into adult events without a great deal of preparation and support. The methodologies used need to address themselves to approaches that children find interesting, time-scales need to reflect children's concentration spans, and information needs to be provided in ways that children themselves can understand.
- Secondly, that once these lessons are recognised, children can and do make a genuine contribution to discussions. In this instance, the issues raised by the children were far removed from the thinking of many of the adults. For example, they identified problems related to disruption to education, lack of dry land for playing, long walks to collect safe drinking water, fear of snakes, problems during the menstrual cycle and difficulties in giving birth. In other words they added new and different dimensions to the debate that would have been disregarded and invisible without their direct input.

Young People's Voices on HIV/AIDS, New Delhi, 1998[35]

This four-day workshop brought young HIV/AIDS community activists and journalists from 17 countries together, alongside media professionals, to encourage them to share experiences and information, explore ways of making their voices heard and counter dis-

34 See footnote 19

35 'Young People's Voices on HIV/AIDS: A Communication for Development Workshop', UNAIDS/UNICEF, 1998

crimination against people living with HIV/AIDS. The workshop used a variety of methods to achieve these objectives, including interactive games, role play, presentations and group discussion, which combined the provision of hard information with the acquisition of skills. The 45 participants were all invited on the strength of their particular expertise or experience with a view to learning from each other and taking back the knowledge gained from the workshop to enhance their day-to-day work on the issue of HIV/AIDS. In other words, the young people and the adults participated both as contributors and learners throughout the workshop.

Comment – The emphasis in this workshop was very much on training and skills-building. By bringing together young people who were already active either as journalists or community activists, it was possible to utilise the knowledge and experience of participants to achieve this objective. By bringing together adults and young people, it was possible to exchange very different perspectives and share expertise. Inevitably, this meant that the young participants tended to be 16 or above, with many in their early twenties. One of the outcomes was a report that now serves as a training tool documenting the methodologies employed during the workshop. It also produced a wide range of very practical suggestions for action that the participants were able to take back with them to their own countries, and which can be used by other community activists and young journalists using the report.

3.2.3 Conferences organized with and for children

Millennium Young People's Congress, Hawaii, 1999[36]

The Millennium Young People's Congress brought over 600 young people from over 100 countries to Hawaii to decide priorities and a programme of action for a sustainable future over the next 1000 years. The motivation for the Congress arose from a sense of frustration at the failure of the Rio Earth Summit to achieve progress. At that event, children participated but in an adult-determined agenda. The Millennium Congress provided an opportunity for young people to develop their own agenda and determine their own priorities.

The process was coordinated through Peace Child International. It began with a request, via NGOs at country level, to millions of children throughout the world to fill in priority cards and send them to national coordinators. National meetings were then held at which young people voted for their top priorities and for their representatives to attend the Congress. A total of 612 young people then gathered in Hawaii to meet each other, share experiences, and set global strategies for dealing with agreed priorities. Mentors were available to the young people to share their knowledge and experience. The delegates identified ten key priorities and then developed detailed action plans for their implementation. Education emerged as everyone's top priority, with a powerful demand not for traditional schooling but for a new type of education that prepares children for living in harmony with the environment and each other. Other priorities included peace-building, a reduction in military expenditure, human rights promotion, and eradicating HIV/AIDS.

After the Congress, a group of young people who had been given the responsibility of producing a report met to put together the artwork, poems, essays and action plans that had been collected by the national coordinators. The outcome was a highly attractive conference report documenting the creativity, commitment and energy of the young people involved.

The Congress has led to an action programme, 'Be the Change', which will provide small grants to projects led by young people under 25 with the support of adult mentors. The funds will be raised via a website set up in partnership with the NetAid Foundation and will be distributed by a Steering Committee of six young people elected at the Congress together with five adults. Chosen projects are put up on the website together with their budget needs in order that individuals or schools

36 Be the Change: Youth Solutions for the New Millennium, Peace Child International, London, 2000

can choose a project and support it. The website also provides a resource for other groups seeking ideas for sustainable development.

Comment – The Congress was 'owned' by children and young people throughout the entire process. The country level planning, the identification of issues for the agenda, the election of participants, the running of the event itself and the production of the congress report were undertaken by young people for young people with adults in a facilitative and supporting, but never controlling role. It demonstrates the capacity of young people to manage a complex and demanding undertaking and bring it to a highly successful conclusion. The event also highlights the fact that children want to be seen as instruments of sustainable development rather than merely the beneficiaries of it.

Of greatest significance is that the conference was followed by a clear and effective programme for future action. Furthermore there is evidence of the advantages of youth-led development projects. For example, a water supply project developed for Tanzania that would have cost US$75,000 for an adult-led development team could be achieved by a 'Be the Change' youth-led team, with adults volunteering support, for less than US$5,000. The projects also provide hands-on education, socially responsible young citizens and the opportunity for sustainability

Commonwealth Children's Summit, 1999, Durban[37]

In 1999, Durban, South Africa hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. It was decided through the South African National Children's Rights Committee to use the opportunity to organize a simultaneous Commonwealth Children's Summit in order to advocate for respect for children's rights.

The planning process began a year in advance. A national task team in South Africa was established to coordinate the project. High Commissions were asked to facilitate the participation of their country delegates in the Summit. Where a response was received or a children's NGO umbrella structure was identified as willing to help, invitations to participate were issued. Each country was asked to consult with children on what issues should be addressed and to select delegates to attend. They were requested to send child delegates between 12-15 years old, along with an accompanying adult. A total of 17 countries participated, with 43 child delegates and 21 accompanying adults. Each country was expected to fund its own participation. Where this was not possible UNICEF or Save the Children provided help. Workshop facilitators were identified by the national task team and provided with a briefing meeting and guidelines for their role.

The children were given a day before the Summit to meet each other and the facilitators, organize themselves into theme groups and generally settle in. They then spent three days working in their thematic groups (poverty, health, child protection, recreation, culture and identity, communication and information, education, and environment). The findings were then shared in a plenary session and an adult drafting team met to produce a Bill of Rights, based on the findings. The following day, the delegates attended the Commonwealth Summit to hand over their Bill of Rights and held a press conference at which a panel of the young people commented on the recommendations they had made to the Commonwealth Summit. The children also had the opportunity to meet with South African Ministers and the President.

Following the conference, the Bill of Rights was distributed to governments and NGOs to encourage children's participation in such events and to promote respect for children's rights. It was also placed on the Summit website. (http://childrensummit.worldonline.co.za/.

Comment – A number of lessons were learned as a result of the Summit:

- Planning needed to start earlier – the conference organizers felt that 18 months was necessary to undertake the preparation. More tightly defined time frames needed to be established and adhered to;

37 'Commonwealth Children's Summit, Final Report', 9-16 November, 1999, Durban, National Children's Rights Committee, 1999

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- A conference organizer should be appointed at an early stage to ensure that coordination and logistics are addressed and the planning committee needs to reflect the international spread of the participating countries;
- More clarity was needed on the nature and extent of children's participation and the expectations of them and this should be properly communicated to the children – for example, children should have been involved in the compilation of the report;
- Children needed more preparation, for example, on different cultural ideas and assumptions;
- The role of accompanying adults and facilitators needed to be better clarified in advance – they need to work alongside the children and operate on the basis of mutual respect;
- More thought needed to be given to language and the use of adults or children as interpreters;
- There needs to be a clear procedure for selecting participants and this must be strictly adhered to;
- More effort was needed to ensure the participation of children with disabilities;
- Better integration with the adult process was needed;
- More thought needed to be given to follow up and mechanisms for reporting back;
- There was a lack of consistency in the attitudes towards the children. There was a need for commitment to respect for the children that might have benefited from a code of practice or guidelines for adult facilitators.

Forum with working children, Oslo, 1997[38]

In 1997, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Norway organized a conference as part of the preparation of the ILO Convention on the worst forms of child labour. Three children were invited to take part in the first part of the conference but were not initially invited to participate in the Ministerial part of the conference. Save the Children Alliance decided to invite working children from different countries to take part in a forum with working children, the primary aim being to support the children participating in the main conference. A total of 22 children took part, each accompanied by an adult who also functioned as an interpreter. They had all participated in regional meetings on the same issue and many also in an international meeting in Amsterdam some months earlier. All belonged to organizations or movements. They were in Oslo for one week – three days preparation, three days during the conference and a follow up day.

The decision to organize the forum was taken shortly before the conference and two facilitators were appointed. The preparation of the agenda was left until the children arrived but some work was done to contact people for the children to interview (such as the Minister for Development and Human Rights), and to arrange for a press conference. The children used the meeting with the Minister to negotiate permission to speak during the Ministry part of the conference. They then prepared the agenda, discussed topics to be presented at the conference, decided who should participate, worked on a speech for the Ministry part of the conference and organized a press conference. Some conflict arose because one group had come with an agenda that differed from the others and felt mandated to adhere to that agenda as it had been given to them by children in their organization. They therefore left the forum.

Comment – The event raised a number of important issues and highlighted a number of tensions:

- It re-affirmed the importance of children who participate in regional or international meetings belonging to a group or organizations. This both strengthens their capacity to contribute and provides opportunities for continuity after the event;
- Related to this, there is a need for those links to be communicated to the adults so that they understand where the children are coming from, their experience and organizational links – in the same way that adult participants will provide short biographical information;
- Children do have differences of opinion in the same way as adults and it cannot be

38 See footnote 19

assumed that they will be a homogeneous group simply because they are children;

- Adult facilitators need to have a clear brief and should meet in advance to prepare themselves, and address potential difficulties that may arise – for example, whether they should intervene when the participating children go beyond the original intention of their involvement, how to set limits while encouraging the optimum level of participation, how to ensure that one group of children does not seek to dominate all other groups;
- Adults need to be prepared for events in which children participate in order to avoid behaviour that is insulting, dismissive or disrespectful of children – the concept that children should be treated in the same way as adult participants should be absolutely insisted upon;
- Children can be manipulated by adults to promote their agenda;
- Children's participation in such adult events can change attitudes, both to children and to the policies under discussion;
- Formal participation of children in the main body of conferences appears to have greater impact than their participation only in fringe meetings;
- Children as young as 13 years participated effectively and should not be excluded by adults who assume that this would be an inappropriate arena for younger children.

Children's Citizenship and Environment Conference, Karakalpakstan, 1999[39]

This conference was organized by two NGOs, Save the Children UK and Perzent in Karakakpakstan, to bring children from six countries of the Aral Sea Basin together to discuss their concerns about environmental degradation and increasing poverty and inequality. Its aims included listening to and learning from children about how their lives are being affected, providing them with the skills and a platform to disseminate their concerns and promoting the concept and practice of participation. It brought together 62 young people aged between 14 –17 years with 26 adults.

Significant emphasis was placed on the importance of detailed preparation with children over the five months prior to the conference. A conference coordinator was appointed who established an adult Organizing Committee and supported the creation of a Children's Coordinating Group in each country. These Groups, in turn, were linked up with a number of children's working groups in their country and disseminated information about children's rights, undertook a variety of environmental projects, provided information on the Aral Sea crisis, and selected and prepared delegates for the conference. Three-day training workshops on children's participation were provided for the Children's Groups from the six republics and training sessions for the adult facilitators were also provided. A few weeks before the actual conference, members of the Coordinating Groups of each country attended a joint meeting to discuss planning and preparation issues, agree the conference programme and role and responsibilities of the adults in the conference. Were they there just to facilitate or also to participate? During the preparatory period, the adult Organizing Committee had taken responsibility for addressing the administrative issues – for example, the venue, publication of conference packs and language issues.

The conference lasted for five days. A Steering Committee, comprising six children and six adults was formed the day before the conference started to review its progress on a daily basis. The conference focused on providing children with opportunities to share experiences. Each country group made a presentation based on issues of concern they had identified in preparation for the conference. These varied in format from plays, poems, puppet shows, and discussion sessions on an exhibition. The children were taken to a town close to the Aral Sea to see the consequences of the environmental catastrophe for themselves. They then discussed their programme of action for the future.

39 'Children's Response to the Aral Sea Crisis: Children's Citizenship and Environment Conference Report', Nukus, Karakalpakstan, 11-15 September. Save the Children/Perzent, 1999

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At the end of the conference the children were invited to evaluate the experience. While there were many detailed criticisms, including the attitude of some adults, the demands of the programme, the expectations placed on the Steering Committee members and the need for more games, the general response was overwhelmingly that they had benefited hugely from the experience.

Comment – This conference was characterized by the organizers giving a great deal of attention to the need for preparation and planning, and involving children from the earliest stages of that process through to the final evaluation. This input was clearly critical to the success of the event. The children particularly valued being given the chance to do something for themselves and felt that the conference had been effective in enabling children of different ages, from different social backgrounds and different countries to meet and work together successfully. They all learned a great deal from their participation. For the adults too, the process had been a learning experience – in understanding the level of talent among the children, in learning how to direct their creative energies and the experience of working with children from very different backgrounds.

As important as the conference itself is the follow-up activity. In particular, a Central Asia-wide citizenship project has been developed by SCF UK in the region to promote understanding of citizenship by creating opportunities for children to experiment and learn through their own individual projects.

Additional Reference Material

The following publications may be of interest to those wishing to seek further reading on the issue of children's democratic participation.

Children's Participation, Roger Hart. UNICEF/Earthscan, New York, 1997

Children's Participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship, Roger Hart. UNICEF International Children Development Centre, Florence, 1992

Children's Rights: Turning Principles into Practice, A. Petren and J. Himes. Save the Children and UNICEF, Stockholm, 2000

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Empowering Children and Young People. Children's Rights Office/Save the Children, London, 1996

Interviewing Children: A Guide for Journalists and Others. Save the Children, London, 1998

Involving Young Researchers: How to Enable Young People to Design and Conduct Research, P. Kirby. Joseph Rowntree Foundation/Save the Children, York, 1999

Listening to Children: Children, Ethics and Social Research, P. Alderson. Barnardos, London, 1995

Listening to Smaller Voices: Children in an Environment of Change. Actionaid, (no date on publication)

Never Too Young: How Young Children Can Take Responsibility and Make Decisions: A Handbook for Early Years Workers. National Early Years Network/ Save the Children, London, 1997

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Seen and Heard: Involving Disabled Children and Young People in Research and Development Projects, L. Ward. YPS and Rowntree Foundation, York, 1997

Taking Part: Children's Participation in Decision-Making, G. Lansdown. Institute of Public Policy Research, London, 1995

The Political Participation of Children, R. Rajani. Harvard Center for Population and Development, Cambridge, Mass, USA 2000

Young People as Researchers: A Learning Resource Pack. Joseph Rowntree Foundation/Save the Children, York, 2000

PROMOTING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING

In this Innocenti Insight, Gerison Lansdown examines the meaning of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says that children are entitled to participate in the decisions that affect them. Lansdown takes a close look at the full meaning of this Article as a tool that can help children themselves to challenge abuses of their rights and take action to defend those rights. She also stresses what the Article does not do. It does not, for example, give children the right to ride roughshod over the rights of others – particularly parents. The Insight makes a strong case for listening to children, outlining the implications of failing to do so and challenging many of the arguments that have been levelled against child participation. It is, above all, a practical guide to this issue, with clear checklists for child participation in conferences and many concrete examples of recent initiatives.

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